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Understanding How African-American Middle School Students Cope with Peer

Victimization: A Mixed-Methods Approach

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Table of Contents

	Page
Acknowledgements	ii
List of Tables.....	vii
List of Figures	viii
Chapter	
1 Introduction	1
2 Review of Literature.....	6
Peer Victimization	6
Coping Theory	14
Coping and Peer Victimization.....	19
Prosocial Coping.....	26
Factors Influencing Prosocial Coping	30
Emotion Regulation	31
Social Problem-solving.....	34
Cognitive Scripts/Heuristics	39
Self-efficacy.....	41
Presence of Bystanders	43
Image Protection and Peer Pressure	44
Social Support.....	46
Social Acceptance and Victimization	49
Gender, Peer Victimization, and Coping	55
3 Statement of the Problem	57

		iv
4	Method	63
	Setting and Participants	63
	Procedures.....	65
	Interviewer Training	65
	Interviewing Procedures	65
	Transcription.....	67
	Coding.....	68
	Converting Themes.....	70
5	Results	71
	Qualitative Results.....	71
	How Students Would Respond to Peer Victimization.....	72
	Talk it Out.....	72
	Fighting.....	76
	Relational and Verbal Aggression	79
	Ignore	80
	End Interpersonal Relationship.....	81
	Problem-solving.....	82
	Seek Social Support from School Staff	84
	Walk Away	85
	Control Emotions.....	87
	Ask Assailant to Stop.....	89
	Prevent Fighting.....	90
	Laugh it Off	90

	v
Peer Mediation.....	91
Seek Parental Support.....	92
Tell People Rumors Are Not True.....	93
How Students Should Cope with Peer Victimization.....	93
Prosocial, Aggressive, and Avoidant Coping.....	94
Factors Influencing Prosocial Coping	97
Level of Problem-solving Skill.....	100
Closeness of the Relationship with the Assailant	101
Emotion Regulation	103
Level of Social Support from Adults.....	103
Attributes of Others	105
Availability of Peer Support	106
Values	106
Self-efficacy.....	108
Absence or Presence of Bystanders.....	108
Emotional Arousal	109
Fear of Retaliation	111
Image	111
Escalation or Continuation of the Problem.....	112
Quantitative Results.....	112
Exploratory Analyses.....	116
6 Discussion	120
Classifying Coping Responses	127

	vi
Barriers and Supports to Prosocial Coping.....	129
Limitations and Future Directions.....	133
Conclusion.....	138
References.....	139
Appendices.....	152
A Complete Protocol of Interviewing Procedures.....	152
B List of the 25 Problem Situations Included in the Response Enumeration Interviews.....	154

List of Tables

	Page
Table 1: Demographic characteristics for the sample.	64
Table 2: Themes Related to How Students Would Respond to Peer Victimization.	72
Table 3: Themes Related to How Students Think They Should Respond to Peer Victimization.	94
Table 4: Supports of Prosocial Coping Strategies.	98
Table 5: Barriers to Prosocial Coping Strategies.	99
Table 6: Summary of Logistic Regression Analyses for Predicting the Use of Prosocial Coping Responses.	113
Table 7: Summary of Logistic Regression Analyses for Predicting the Use of Aggressive Coping Responses.	114
Table 8: Summary of Logistic Regression Analyses for Predicting the Use of Avoidant Coping Responses.	115
Table 9: Summary of Three Logistic Regression Analyses for Predicting the Use of an Aggressive Coping Response.	118
Table 9: Summary of Two Logistic Regression Analyses for Predicting the Use of an Avoidant Coping Response.	118
Table 10: Summary of Logistic Regression Analyses Predicting the Use of a Prosocial Coping Response.	119

List of Figures

	Page
Figure 1: Predicted Differences in Coping Strategies Generated by Girls and Boys	61
Figure 2: Predicted Differences in Coping Strategies Generated by Members of Different Social Clusters.....	61

ABSTRACT

Understanding How African-American Middle School Students Cope with Peer
Victimization: A Mixed-Methods Approach

By Suzanne Camou Linkroum, B. A.

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
Science at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2006

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A mixed-methods approach was used to determine how African-American middle school students cope with peer victimization and to identify factors that inhibit and promote the use of prosocial coping strategies. In a previous study, participants had been categorized into four social clusters: well-adjusted, rejected, passively-victimized, or aggressively-victimized based on a cluster analysis of self-reported psychosocial variables. Interviews with a sub sample of 80 students focusing on identifying both how students thought they would respond and how they thought they should respond to hypothetical situations involving peer victimization were analyzed. Interviews also elicited factors that would support or impede the use of the coping responses generated by the participants. Qualitative analysis identified 15 coping responses that students

would use, and categorized each individual response as prosocial, aggressive, or avoidant based on emotional, cognitive, and behavioral criteria. In addition, 13 coping responses were identified as strategies youth thought they should do. Ten supports, and ten barriers to prosocial coping responses were identified, representing a range of internal and interpersonal factors. Results of logistic regression models did not support the central hypothesis that the type of coping response generated (e.g., prosocial, aggressive, avoidant) would depend on social cluster. However, significant gender results were found, suggesting that girls were more likely than boys to identify prosocial coping strategies. Implications for violence prevention programs are discussed.

Chapter One

Introduction

Peer victimization involves being the recipient of different forms of aggression, including physical aggression, verbal harassment, and relational aggression. One of the first studies of peer victimization, conducted by Olweus (1978), identified a group of “whipping boys,” weaker boys who were physically and verbally abused by their stronger peers. Physical, or overt, forms of victimization include being hit, punched, kicked, or assaulted with a weapon (Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1988). Peer victimization also includes verbal aggression, which involves name-calling, taunting, teasing, and saying mean things (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996; Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1988). More recently, researchers have broadened the definition of peer victimization to include social forms of aggression. For instance, Crick and Grotpeter (1996) examined relational aggression, a form of victimization that involves aggressors purposely damaging or controlling the target’s social relationships with peers. Common acts of relational aggression include social manipulation (e.g., not being invited to a birthday party due to target’s failure to complete peer’s request), and being the target of a hostile rumor that is perpetuated throughout the peer group (Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Crick & Grotpeter, 1996).

Peer victimization is a common social experience during adolescence (Vernberg, Ewell, Beery, Freeman, & Abwender, 1995). Studies have shown that as many as 10% to

24% of children are chronically victimized by their peers. In one study, as many as 75% of middle school students indicated that they had experienced at least one instance of peer victimization in the past year, and 65% of these students indicated it was difficult to handle (Farrell et al., 2005).

The pervasiveness of peer victimization is alarming given that chronic, repeated exposure to victimization increases a child's risk for psychosocial maladjustment. Chronic peer victimization has been linked to a number of maladaptive outcomes, including depression, anxiety, loneliness, low self-esteem, social withdrawal, peer rejection, and school avoidance (Boulton & Underwood, 1992; Egan & Perry, 1998; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996). A smaller subgroup of victimized children exhibit externalizing problems, including ineffectual aggression and hostility (Dodge & Pettit, 2003). In contrast, many youth who are exposed to less frequent peer-initiated attacks remain relatively unaffected. In one study conducted in a small mid-western town, 75% of middle and high school students reported having experienced some form of peer victimization at least once (Hoover, Oliver, & Hazler, 1992). However, the majority of these youth, 85%, indicated that the experience had not severely affected them academically, socially, or emotionally. Whereas youth who only rarely experience victimization may be at less risk for negative consequences, it is also possible that some youth cope more effectively with peer victimization than others. Thus, understanding how adolescents successfully cope with victimization, and what factors facilitate and/or inhibit successful coping is an important area of inquiry.

Although interest in adolescent coping behaviors is growing (Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001; Tolan, Gorman-Smith, Henry, Chung, & Hunt, 2002), few studies have examined the strategies adolescents use to cope with peer victimization. The few studies that have been conducted have been guided by the approach/avoidant coping model (Causey & Dubow, 1992; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002; Phelps, 2001; Vernberg et al., 1995). In this model, coping refers to all responses that are made by an individual dealing with a stressful event (Silver & Wortman, 1980). Approach strategies involve cognitive acts that directly attempt to change ways of thinking about the problem or behavioral acts intended to resolve the problem. Conversely, avoidant strategies are cognitive, behavioral, or emotional acts intended to minimize the threat of the stressor, such as relieving tension by emoting, or removing oneself from the problematic situation (Ebata & Moos, 1991; Roth & Cohen, 1986). Examples of approach coping strategies used by victimized youth to deal with peer aggression include seeking social support from a peer or adult, and active problem-solving (Fields & Prinz, 1997). Avoidant strategies include positive and negative self-statements, (Underwood et al., 1999), removing oneself from the situation (Underwood et al., 1999), internalizing behaviors such as self-blame and rumination, and externalizing behaviors such as hitting and verbal retaliation (Fields & Prinz, 1997).

Coping strategies for dealing with peer aggression differ in the extent to which they are prosocial. Strategies that are prosocial aim to decrease or eliminate the presence of the stressor, and attenuate the negative emotions and cognitions associated with it in ways that reflect prosocial values (Erwin, Camou, Sullivan, & Farrell, 2005). In this way, prosocial

coping behaviors are similar to approach strategies; both involve active attempts to directly resolve the stressor, and often rely on problem-solving skills and social support. Some prosocial alternatives that were identified by a sample of urban sixth graders living in housing projects included walking away from teasing or taunting, avoiding aggression, confronting others when they are wrong, and convincing others to refrain from doing wrong or hurting others (Bergin, Talley, & Hamer, 2003). For low-income, urban youth, refraining from violence was considered an important aspect of prosocial behavior (Bergin et al., 2003). Other prosocial coping strategies that have been reported by adolescents include social support seeking, and active problem-solving behaviors (Erwin et al., 2005). Understanding the factors that support the use of prosocial coping strategies and inhibit the use of aggressive coping strategies is an important goal of violence prevention programs (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2002).

Studies examining peer victimization have not generally considered factors that influence prosocial coping. Recently, Erwin et al. (2005) conducted a qualitative study that identified factors that facilitated and those that inhibited prosocial coping to problem situations across many domains (e.g., internal, peer, family, school, and neighborhood). Their study suggested that internal and interpersonal processes were important determinants of prosocial coping behaviors. Seven themes were identified as supports and barriers to prosocial coping: self-efficacy, problem-solving skills, presence of bystanders, response from the other person, and availability of social support from parents, peers, and other adults. In addition, internalized prosocial goals were identified as supports for prosocial coping. Emotion regulation, image protection, and interpersonal factors (e.g.,

anticipating how the other person would respond) were identified as barriers to prosocial coping.

In sum, peer victimization involves being the target of different forms of aggressive acts which can precipitate internalizing problems such as anxiety, social withdrawal, and depression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Egan & Perry, 1998), and externalizing problems, such as aggression (Prinstein, Boergers, & Spirito, 2001; Schwartz et al., 1998). Several studies have shown that peer victimization is a common experience for many students in this country (Farrell et al., 1998; Olweus, 1993; Pellegrini et al., 1999); however, peer victimization has only recently received rigorous empirical attention (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996) and significant gaps in the literature remain. Only a handful of studies have examined coping strategies used by victims of peer aggression, and the majority of these have not adequately captured the breadth of youth coping responses. In addition, none of these studies have distinguished among prosocial, avoidant, and aggressive coping. Further, the factors that influence the use of prosocial coping in response to peer victimization remain to be determined. Finally, the few studies that have been completed have relied on predominantly middle-class, Caucasian samples of children. This study attempts to address these gaps in the literature by using a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods to determine: (a) coping strategies used by African-American, urban middle school students dealing with peer victimization, and (b) factors that inhibit and facilitate prosocial responses to victimization.

Chapter Two

Review of Literature

In this section, the literature examining the role of peer victimization, coping, and individual, parental, and peer factors on the development of prosocial and aggressive coping is reviewed. First, the prevalence and consequences of peer victimization are discussed. A theory of youth coping and its application to coping with peer victimization is then reviewed. Next, the notion of prosocial and aggressive coping is introduced, and a study examining barriers and supports to prosocial coping is highlighted. This is followed by a discussion of predictors of prosocial and aggressive coping, organized by internal and interpersonal processes. Then, the influence of gender and social acceptance on coping behaviors used by victims is addressed. Finally, methodological limitations of existing studies are discussed.

Peer Victimization

Early adolescence marks a developmental period when children begin spending more time with their peers and less time with their parents (Larson & Richards, 1991). Peer acceptance becomes a central task during this developmental stage (Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999; Lashbrook, 2000), and susceptibility to peer pressure reaches its peak (Holmbeck, 1994). Peer interactions provide children with the opportunity to learn and practice prosocial skills, and peer acceptance has been shown to be important for healthy

psychosocial adjustment (Ladd, 1999). Not all peer interactions, however, are positive. During adolescence, children experience elevated levels of verbal harassment, physical violence, ostracism, and other forms of peer victimization (Vernberg et al., 1995).

Peer victimization involves being the recipient of one or more forms of aggression, including physical harm (e.g., being hit, kicked, shoved, shot), verbal harassment (e.g., being teased, taunted, talked about), and relational victimization (e.g., being excluded from social groups, ostracized). Empirical evidence supports the notion that these types of peer aggression are distinct constructs. For instance, Perry and colleagues (1988) concluded that physical and verbal forms of aggression are orthogonal. In their cross-sectional study, a predominantly Caucasian, middle-class sample of children in the third through sixth grades was rated by their peers on a variety of different characteristics (e.g. kids make fun of him/her, he/she gets beat up, he/she hits and pushes other people around). A three-way analysis of variance found that verbal and aggressive forms of peer victimization are distinct constructs. Whereas victimization through physical means decreases with age, the incidence of verbal harassment remains consistent throughout early and late childhood. In another study, Kochenderfer and Ladd (1996) identified four distinct types of victimization in a sample of predominantly Caucasian kindergarteners: general (i.e., picked on), direct-physical (i.e., hit), direct-verbal (i.e., being told mean things about you to your face) and indirect-verbal (i.e., had bad things said about you to classmates). Similarly, Crick, Bigbee, and Howes (1996) found that children consider relational victimization a separate construct from verbal or physical aggression. In their study, a sample of 9- to 12-year olds was asked open-ended questions about anger. Children reported that relational aggression, verbal

aggression, and physical aggression are all forms of intentionally harmful behaviors experienced in childhood. Their sample reported that girls were likely to use relational aggression and verbal insults to harm their peers, and boys were more likely to engage in physical aggression or verbal insults.

A large body of work has shown that peer victimization is a common and serious problem for children and adolescents. As many as 10% to 24% of children are chronically victimized by their peers (Olweus, 1993; Pellegrini et al., 1999; Schwartz et al., 1993; 1998). For instance, 24% of children in a predominantly Caucasian sample of fifth grade students identified themselves as victims, defined as children who were repeatedly exposed to peer maltreatment (Pellegrini et al., 1999). In another study, Crick and Bigbee (1998) classified participants as non-victims, relational victims, overt victims, or relational and overt victims based on peer- and self-report instruments. They found that 25% of boys, and 17% of girls experienced at least one type of peer victimization. Boys were most likely to be targets of both relational and overt aggression (12%), followed by overt aggression (9%), then relational aggression (4%). Girls were the targets of relational aggression (12%), relational and overt aggression (4%), and overt aggression (1%). In another study, Schwartz and colleagues (1993) observed a sample of young African-American children to better understand the development of peer victimization. Youth were randomly assigned to play groups consisting of 8 to 10 youth who did not know one another. Children's social interactions were coded for levels of aggression and victimization. Ten percent of the children were socially excluded from the group and were the recipients of peer aggression (Schwartz et al., 1993).

Adolescents have reported peer victimization as problematic in studies designed to identify stressful life events and daily hassles. Recently, Farrell and colleagues conducted individual interviews with a sample of predominantly African-American middle school students, peer mediators, teachers, school staff, parents, and community center staff (Farrell et al., 2005a). The authors were guided by grounded theory in their analysis of the interviews, and identified 39 themes representing a wide range of problems experienced by urban middle school students. Five forms of victimization emerged from these interviews: physical, social, chronic, sexual, and stealing/destruction of property. Social victimization was the most frequently mentioned type of victimization, and was identified as a problem by 54% of the sample. Overt victimization was also frequently mentioned, followed by chronic victimization, stealing/destruction of property, and sexual victimization. In a follow-up study, Farrell and colleagues (Farrell et al., 2005b) created a measure to assess the frequency and difficulty of the problem situations identified in the interviews. The survey was completed by a sample of predominantly African-American, urban middle school students from the same schools where the interviews had been conducted. Between 50% and 74% of the sample reported that they had experienced some type of peer aggression at least once in the previous year. For instance, 62% of the sample reported that they had been teased and picked on by other students at school at least once in the past year, and 38% of the sample indicated that this happens to them monthly. Further, 55% of the students surveyed reported that this experience was difficult for them to handle. Mosley and Lex (1990) developed a measure of stressful life events from individual interviews conducted with 24 urban minority youth aged 14 to 21. Though the majority of

the situations they identified did not pertain to victimization, 7% of the sample reported that no longer being accepted by friends was a major concern, as was being excluded from social clubs or activities (16%).

In another study, Farrell et al. (1998) conducted focus groups with sixth grade students attending urban schools with a predominantly African-American student body from low-income families. In their study, participants identified problems that they had encountered, and how often they occurred. Problems discussed in the focus groups were coded into six categories. Peer provocation, including situations involving verbal and physical harassment, such as teasing, name-calling, and gossip, was the most frequently reported stressor, representing 22% of the situations identified. In phase two of their study, a larger sample of urban middle school students completed a survey on which they rated the frequency and difficulty of the problems identified by the focus groups. Prevalence rates for experiencing specific examples of peer provocation at least once ranged from 21% to 63%, with 15% to 42% of the sample reporting they experienced these problems at least monthly. This suggests that peer provocation is not solely experienced by a small subgroup of “victimized” children, but is a common stressor for many youth. The pervasiveness of this problem is especially alarming in light of the research that points to the negative social and psychological consequences that result from peer victimization.

Several studies have indicated that being the recipient of peer victimization is associated with the development of internalizing and externalizing problems, such as loneliness, depression, and social avoidance (Prinstein et al., 2001), low peer status (Crick, Casas, & Ku, 1999), and aggressive behavior (Prinstein et al., 2001). Most studies

examining outcomes of victimized youth have linked peer victimization with internalizing problems, though these findings have been based on primarily Caucasian samples of youth. For example, Boulton and Underwood (1992) administered a survey to English children aged 8 to 12 attending urban schools. The authors found that youth who reported being victimized “sometimes” or “several times a week” had a constellation of stressors that were not apparent in non-victims. For instance, victimized children were less likely to report being happy during playtime, and were more likely to report loneliness at school, being alone during playtime, and having fewer friends when compared to non-victims. In another study, Prinstein and colleagues (2001) examined the individual and combined effects of overt and relational victimization on adjustment in an ethnically diverse sample of high school students living in a small city. They found that for all adolescents, regardless of sex, targets of both overt and relational aggression reported higher levels of depression, loneliness, and externalizing problems than adolescents who were the target of only overt aggression or relational aggression. Those who were the target of one form of peer aggression were, in turn, more likely to report depression, loneliness, and externalizing behaviors than children who were not victimized.

Similar findings were reported in the few studies of peer victimization that have been conducted with African-American samples. For example, Graham, Bellmore and Juvonen (2003) found that victims of peer aggression, identified through self-report and peer nomination, had lower levels of self-esteem, and higher levels of social anxiety, depression, and somatic complaints as measured by self-and teacher-report. Similarly, in their large-scale, prospective study of Latino and African-American elementary school

children, Hanish and Guerra (2002) found that previous victimization was correlated with internalizing, externalizing, and social problems two years later.

Additional research has shown that a small subgroup of victimized youth exhibit higher levels of externalizing behaviors, such as aggression, distractibility, poor impulse control, and bullying (Haynie et al., 2001; Kumpulainen et al., 1998; Schwartz, et al., 2001). This subgroup of victims has been referred to as “aggressive-victims,” “ineffectual aggressors,” “bully/victims,” and “provocative-victims” in the literature (for review see Schwartz, et al., 2001). Some studies of aggressive victims have focused on the association between victimization and externalizing behaviors. For example, Schwartz and colleagues (1998) found that the level of peer-nominated victimization at age eight or nine was predictive of teacher- and mother-reported social problems and externalizing difficulties two years later. Victims were defined as youth who were picked on, teased, and hit or pushed. Unfortunately, this study did not include relational victimization, which is a common form of aggression used by girls (Crick & Bigbee, 1998). Nevertheless, they found that victimization at age eight or nine predicted later levels of externalizing behaviors even after normative increases in aggressive behavior were taken into account. Surprisingly, this study found weak and inconsistent gender moderating effects, suggesting that victimization can lead to increases in aggression for both boys and girls.

The link between peer victimization and aggression has been demonstrated in other studies as well. Durant, Pendergrast, and Cadenhead (1994) conducted a survey-based study with a sample of low-income African-American adolescents that found that exposure to victimization was predictive of engagement in physical fights. Results of this cross-

sectional, self-report study indicated that exposure to violence and victimization accounted for 8% of the variance in the frequency of fighting. Unfortunately, this study did not examine the moderating effect of gender on this relation. In another study, Graham and Juvonen (2002) found that African-American males who had been identified by their peers as victims had the highest levels of teacher-rated aggression within a sample of Latino and African-American middle school students. In a cross-sectional, survey-based study, a primarily Caucasian sample of students in the seventh through ninth grades reported the extent to which they were the recipients of peer victimization and their engagement in overt and relational aggression (Vernberg et al., 1995). A strong association between being the recipient of peer victimization and aggressive behavior emerged, even for children who did not endorse aggression as legitimate and acceptable. Similarly, in a sample of middle class preschool-aged children, Crick, Casas, and Ku (1999) found that many victimized children, as identified by teacher report, were also rated by their teacher as aggressive, with 41% of overtly victimized children, and 19% of relationally victimized children rated as aggressive.

Other studies have demonstrated that, in general, aggressive-victims exhibit higher levels of maladjustment than internalizing victims and non-victims. For instance, Haynie and colleagues (2001) sampled public middle school students (24% African-American) and assessed several different psychosocial variables (e.g., bullying, victimization, self-control, misconduct, association with deviant peers, school adjustment, depression) through self-report measures. Participants were classified as victims, bullies, bully/victims, or non-victims. They found that bully/victims had the least favorable score on all

psychosocial measures, accentuating the severity of their maladjustment. Kupersmidt and Patterson (1991) found similar results in a sample of second through fourth grade students. They found that bully/victims, identified through peer-report, had higher levels of teacher-reported hyperactivity, disruptiveness, and attention-seeking behavior than passive-victims and non-victims. In addition, aggressive-victims experience greater levels of social exclusion than their passive-victim and bully counterparts. Perry, Kusel, and Perry (1988) found that victimization and aggression have unique variance associated with the prediction of peer acceptance, and that aggressive-victims, or those with high ratings of both victimization and aggression have lower social preference scores than passive-victims or bullies.

In conclusion, peer victimization is a common problem for youth, and has been identified as a frequent and difficult stressor for African-American youth (Farrell et al., 2005). Empirical evidence has consistently linked peer victimization with maladaptive outcomes, including internalizing and externalizing problems. Though peer victimization has been a frequent area of inquiry over the past 15 years, most studies have relied on predominantly Caucasian samples of middle-class youth, limiting our knowledge of how peer victimization influences the development of minority youth. An important future direction in the peer victimization literature is examining coping behaviors associated with this common social stressor.

Coping Theory

Examining dimensions of adolescent coping behaviors is useful for providing a framework to organize overarching characteristics of youth coping responses (Compas,

Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thompsen, & Wadsworth, 2001). Many conceptual models have been presented in the psychological and developmental literature in an effort to understand how youth cope with stressors. Roth and Cohen (1986) argued for the differentiation between two types of coping styles: approach coping, and avoidant coping. In this model, approach-type coping is action-oriented activity intended to minimize or eliminate the stressor. Examples of approach-type coping include problem-solving (e.g., making changes that will make the situation better), and seeking social support (e.g., asking a peer or adult for advice) because these strategies involve cognitively and behaviorally confronting the stressor (Fields & Prinz, 1997; Roth & Cohen, 1986). Avoidance-type coping involves cognitive and behavioral strategies that are oriented away from the stressor (Roth & Cohen, 1986). Instead of attempting to reduce or eliminate the existence of the stressor, avoidant coping behaviors deal with emotional and cognitive reactions associated with the stressor. Examples include cognitive distancing (e.g., refusing to think about the incident), internalizing (e.g., self-blame and rumination), and externalizing (e.g., getting mad and hitting someone) (Causey & Dubow, 1992). Children use a combination of approach and avoidant coping strategies when dealing with stress (Phelps, 2001), though approach strategies are associated with more positive adjustment and greater effectiveness (Fields & Prinz, 1997).

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) developed a model of coping that has also been influential in informing researchers interested in adolescent coping behaviors. Their definition of coping posits that coping is an intentional, dynamic process that involves cognitive and behavioral management of situations that are perceived as threatening or

stressful; coping efforts change as the demands and threat of the situation change. Their model identifies two dimensions of coping: problem-focused and emotion-focused.

Problem-focused coping is oriented towards impacting the stressor by changing environmental factors or circumstances that perpetuate the stressor. Examples of problem-focused coping include seeking information, generating alternative strategies, and choosing a strategy. Emotion-focused coping efforts aim to alleviate negative emotional arousal associated with the stressor. Examples of emotion-focused coping include seeking support from others, expressing emotion, and avoiding the stressor. In general, the use of emotion-focused coping increases as children age from later childhood to adolescence, whereas the use of problem-focused coping remains stable (Compas et al., 1988). Further, emotion-focused coping has been linked to psychological distress in a cross-sectional study of children and adolescents (Compas et al., 1988). However, because the design of this study was not longitudinal, it is unclear whether emotion-focused coping is maladaptive, or if emotional coping is merely a response to psychological distress (Compas et al., 1999). Tolan and colleagues (2002) found that inner-city youth who relied on emotion-focused coping techniques (e.g., blaming others for what is going on, letting off steam by complaining to family members or friends, getting angry and yelling at people, saying mean things to people, and being sarcastic) were more vulnerable to increases in externalizing problems over time in comparison to youth who sought social support and guidance, or those who used a variety of different coping methods.

According to the primary-secondary control model, coping involves the individual attempting to regain control over the stressful situation (Compas, Connor, Saltzman,

Thompson, & Wadsworth, 1999; Weisz, McCabe, & Dennig, 1994). The distinction between primary and secondary control is central to this model of coping. Primary control is achieved through modifying environmental conditions to meet individual needs, whereas secondary control requires adjusting oneself to accommodate the conditions of the external environment. Thurer and Weisz (1997) added relinquished control to this model, referring to the point at which the individual gives up control of the situation. In general, studies have suggested that using secondary control techniques (e.g., emotion-focused coping) are more adaptive for coping with stressors which are largely uncontrollable and primary control techniques are more adaptive in controllable situations (Weisz et al., 1994). It is important to remember, however, that coping is a complex process, such that youth probably “mix” their use of primary and secondary control coping methods, and the ability to customize the coping approach or use different techniques simultaneously is optimal (Berg & Calderone, 1994; Weisz et al., 1994). Some youth, particularly those who are frequently victimized, or those who attribute hostile intent to their assailants, may perceive low controllability in events involving victimization, which may impact their coping goals and priorities.

African-American youth have been underrepresented in the coping literature. Like many areas of psychology, the majority of studies have used predominantly Caucasian, middle-class samples. However, the importance of context and its impact on coping has been accentuated in the recent coping literature (Compas et al., 2001). The lack of studies that examine coping in African-American youth is alarming in light of research that highlights the differences between the life experiences of African-

American youth and their Caucasian peers (Attar et al., 1994; Garrison, Schoenbach, Schulchter, & Kaplan, 1987; Guerra, Huesmann, Tolan, Acker, & Eron, 2002). For instance, Garrison and colleagues (1987) found that African-American youth reported more stressful life experiences than their Caucasian peers, including the death, divorce, or separation of their parents, death of other family members including siblings, close friends, or grandparents, decreased parental income, changes within the home including frequent moving, or a new adult moving into the home, involvement with the criminal justice system, feelings of distrust, and poorer academic performance. However, socio-economic standing may account for this difference. The researchers found a main effect for social class, but not race, such that the frequency of stressful experiences increased as social class decreased. This effect was larger for African-American youth than their Caucasian peers, suggesting that poorer African-American youth may be more negatively impacted by these stressful experiences when compared with poorer Caucasian children (Allison et al., 1999).

Guerra and colleagues (1995) found that poorer children reported higher levels of life stress than less disadvantaged youth, and that minorities were more likely to be poor than their Caucasian counterparts. In their sample of 1,932 inner-city elementary school children, African-American students were the most economically-disadvantaged, and socio-economic standing was correlated with teacher-reported levels of aggression. The authors also found that economically-disadvantaged children were more likely to experience stressful life events, and to develop attitudes supporting aggression. Attar, Guerra, and Tolan (1994) reported similar results. They found that African-American children were exposed to more stressors than Caucasian children, and that the impact of

stressors on psychosocial adjustment was related to neighborhood disadvantage. In their study, the total number of stressors to which a participant was exposed was predictive of concurrent and future aggression, as measured one year later. The authors suggested that children living in poverty who also experience frequent stressful life events may develop aggressive coping patterns and norms supporting aggression in response to the difficult environmental demands placed on them.

Coping and Peer Victimization

Although the examination of youth coping has dramatically increased in recent years, only a few studies have examined how youth cope with peer victimization. Those studies that have been conducted have been guided almost exclusively by the approach-avoidant or problem/emotion focused conceptualizations of coping. The narrow theoretical approach of the existing literature may limit our understanding of how youth cope with peer victimization. Nevertheless, these studies have provided an initial attempt at identifying how youth cope with victimization, and determining how different coping strategies relate to psychosocial adjustment.

Causey and Dubow (1992) developed a child-focused scale that has been widely used by researchers examining how youth cope with peer victimization. This scale was developed in an effort to test the relevance of the approach-avoidance model of coping with interpersonal problems (e.g., a peer argument) and academic stressors (e.g., a bad grade) for children and adolescents. Some of the items were selected from existing measures of child and adolescent coping, whereas additional items were developed to assess ideas put forth by the approach/avoidance model of coping. Principal factor

analysis, with varimax rotation, identified a five-factor solution for organizing the responses associated with coping with interpersonal problems. These factors included seeking social support (e.g., talk to somebody about how it made me feel), self-reliance/problem-solving (e.g., change something so things will work out), distancing (e.g., refuse to think about it), internalizing (e.g., go off by myself), and externalizing (e.g., take it out on others because I feel sad or angry), and accounted for 38% of the variance. They tested the internal consistency of the scale and found Cronbach's alphas for items associated with coping with interpersonal problems ranged from .68 to .84. Two-week test-retest reliabilities ranged from .58 (distancing techniques) to .78 (externalizing techniques). Finally, they found that approach subscales (e.g., Seeking Social Support and Problem-solving) were significantly correlated with each other, $r = .52$, but avoidant strategies (e.g., distancing, internalizing, and externalizing) were only modestly correlated with one another. Finally, a negative relation was reported between Externalizing and Seeking Social Support, and Externalizing and Problem-solving, suggesting that children who cope aggressively with peer problems may be less likely to engage in action-oriented, approach-type coping behaviors.

Kochenderfer-Ladd and Skinner (2002) assessed the moderating effects of coping on the relation between victimization and maladjustment using the Self Report Coping Measure (Causey & Dubow, 1992) in an ethnically-diverse sample of 9-10 year-old children. Interesting gender and level of victimization differences emerged. For instance, problem-solving, and seeking social support were associated with low social status for victimized boys, but non-victimized boys who used similar coping strategies had high

social preference scores. On the other hand, seeking social support buffered victimized girls from the negative social and psychological effects of peer aggression. However, social support seeking was predictive of low social preference for seldomly-victimized girls. Avoidant strategies, including distancing, ignoring, and externalizing were associated with poorer adjustment and low social preference for boys and girls. The mixed results of this study highlight the importance of the continuation of studies examining coping with victimization.

Phelps (2001) also used Causey and Dubow's (1992) Self-Report Coping Measure, and assessed coping strategies used in response to overt and relational aggression in a sample of Caucasian third through sixth graders attending elementary and middle schools in a rural public school district. She found that older children most frequently reported using distancing and internalizing strategies when coping with relational aggression, whereas they reported greater use of externalizing strategies when coping with overt aggression. Moreover, girls were more likely to endorse the use of problem-solving and support-seeking than were boys. Further, chronically-victimized children, who were in the top quartile for exposure to peer aggression, were more likely to report using internalizing strategies, and less likely to report using problem-solving strategies compared to peers who had experienced fewer incidents of peer aggression.

Using similar items to those included on the Self-Report Coping Measure, Kochenderfer and Ladd (1996) determined the effectiveness of six coping strategies: crying, fighting back, telling the teacher, walking away, having a friend help, and acquiescing to the victimizer (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996). These coping strategies were

chosen a priori by the researchers, and were incorporated into self- and peer-report measures of coping developed in order to test the approach-avoidant coping model. The measures were completed by a predominantly Caucasian sample of pre-school students from lower and middle class families. Participants completed the measures during the fall and spring semesters, which allowed authors to distinguish between students who were only victimized in the fall, and those who were victimized in the fall and spring (e.g., stable victims). Data analysis involved predicting group membership (e.g., fall-only victim, spring-only victim, stable victim, non-victim) from coping behaviors assessed in the fall semester. Their results supported the theory that approach behaviors are more effective and result in more positive outcomes than avoidant behaviors. For instance, boys who reported fighting back were more likely to be stable victims, whereas boys who were no longer victimized in the spring term were more likely to report seeking help from a friend. Interestingly, girls who were in the fall-only victim group and the stable-victim group did not differ in their coping style.

In another study, Vernberg, Ewell, Beery, Freeman, and Abwender (1996) focused on studying the effects of seeking social support from a friend or an adult on the relation between peer victimization and adjustment in a sample of seventh and eighth grade students living in suburban, middle-class neighborhoods. Adolescents completed questionnaires that assessed their level of exposure to being teased, hit, excluded, or threatened by peers, and their social support seeking behavior after aversive encounters. Self- and parent-report measures of adjustment included assessments of loneliness, and internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Results indicated that a sizeable proportion of

adolescents (29% to 51%, depending on the type of adverse interaction) did not disclose the negative event to anyone. However, when events were disclosed, adolescents were most likely to seek support from a friend (22% to 70%, depending on event), followed by a parent (0% to 40%, depending on event). Few students reported seeking social support from teachers or siblings. Interestingly, social support seeking behavior was not dependent on gender. For boys and girls, higher disclosure scores were associated with lower levels of self-reported loneliness. Conversely, girls with lower disclosure scores had higher levels of parent-reported internalizing problems.

Smith, Shu, and Madsen (2001) examined coping strategies used by English schoolchildren in response to peer victimization. Children aged 10 to 16 who had a range of experiences with peer victimization indicated on a checklist how they coped with bullying. The six coping strategies included on the checklist consisted of approach strategies (e.g., told them to stop, asked an adult for help, asked friends for help) and avoidance strategies (e.g., ignored them, fought back, cried, and ran away). These items were selected based on their relevance to approach-avoidant coping theory. The most common response to victimization was to ignore the bully (64% of victims), followed by telling the bully to stop (25% of victims), asking an adult for help (22%), fighting back (22%), crying (16%), asking a friend for help (16%), and running away (10%). Significant gender differences emerged, with boys more likely than girls to fight back (29% and 15%) and girls more likely than boys to cry (27% and 6%) or ask a friend for help (22% and 11%). Children who were frequently victimized “several times a week” were more likely

to report running away, crying, and asking a friend or adult for help than youth who were victimized less frequently.

Underwood and colleagues (1999) conducted an observational study to explore how children aged 8 to 12 coped with teasing and taunting from a same-aged peer. In their study, 382 children aged 8 to 12 played a video game with a confederate peer who taunted and teased them for being bad at the game. The game was rigged so that the participant lost 75% of the time. Participants responded to the taunts with silence, humorous faces, hostile faces, distressed faces, positive self-statements, negative self-statements, positive statements about the confederate, negative statements about the confederate, and removing themselves from the situation. Older children were less physically or verbally expressive than their younger peers, and were also less likely to make positive statements about themselves or their opponent than the younger children. Whereas this may reflect a nonchalance or indifference about winning the game or an effort to avoid embarrassment, it may also reflect that these children did not know how to cope with the provocation in a way that would prevent peer rejection.

Casey-Cannon, Hayward, and Gowen (2001) conducted a qualitative study in which they interviewed 26 middle school girls about their experiences with victimization and their responses to it. Respondents were presented with the following statement: "We know that girls can sometimes be pretty mean to other people their age. We are wondering if there has ever been a time when someone who was your age, or a little younger, has ever been really mean, nasty, or rude to you." Additional follow-up questions were asked, including the behavioral and emotional responses to the event. Interviews were coded by

response category. Results indicated that the majority of the girls, 57%, reported internalizing responses, such as feeling sad, rejected, upset, and crying. Additional avoidant strategies included ignoring and distancing. A minority of the girls mentioned that they would retaliate with physical or verbal aggression, the response that was regarded as the most effective for preventing future instances of victimization. Surprisingly, only five of the respondents indicated that they would seek social support from adults: one student indicated that her teachers did not listen when she approached them for support, whereas another student indicated that adult support only provided short-term relief from the problem.

In conclusion, studies have indicated that youth use a variety of approach and avoidant strategies to deal with peer aggression, including social support, problem-solving, internalizing, avoiding, cognitive distancing, and externalizing. However, almost all of what is known about how youth cope with peer victimization is from studies that have measured coping behaviors developed to confirm the approach-avoidant model of coping (Causey & Dubow, 1992; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002; Phelps, 2001; Smith, Shu, & Madsen, 2001). Causey and Dubow (1992) developed a scale that has been used by the majority of the studies examining how victims cope with peer harassment. This scale was created specifically to apply Roth and Cohen's (1984) approach-avoidant type coping theory in a sample of adolescents dealing with academic and social stressors. In contrast, Goldfried and D'Zurilla (1969) have emphasized the importance of using input from the population of interest during scale development. Because previous researchers did not receive input from children and adolescents during the scale development process, our

knowledge pertaining to the range of behaviors used by youth to deal with peer victimization is limited.

Prosocial Coping

Compas and colleagues (2001) noted the dangers of grouping coping strategies into broad categories (e.g., approach/avoidant, problem-focused/emotion-focused). They argued that the broad classification of coping behaviors “disguises the heterogeneity among different types of coping responses (Compas et al., 2001, pp. 91).” In other words, classifying coping responses into broad categories such as approach versus avoidance or problem-focused versus emotion-focused may oversimplify the structure and function of coping in children. For instance, Ayers and colleagues (1996) found that both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping techniques loaded on an active coping factor, indicating that this broad category misrepresents coping behavior.

However, examining different dimensions of coping is necessary for some purposes. For instance, differentiating between prosocial, avoidant, and aggressive coping behaviors is necessary for integrating studies of coping into a prevention framework. Over the past 30 years, the movement to develop and evaluate programs designed to promote positive youth development, rather than merely prevent youth problem behavior, has gained considerable momentum (Catalano et al., 2002). The emphasis on positive youth development requires identifying youth coping behaviors that are both effective and moral (e.g., do not infringe on the rights of others). Hence, it is important to develop interventions that will increase the likelihood that students will engage in prosocial coping

behaviors, and decrease the likelihood that they will either avoid the problem or retaliate aggressively.

Erwin et al. (2005) differentiated between prosocial and aggressive coping in their study of 122 urban middle school students. Participants were interviewed individually about how they would respond to, and how they thought they should respond to 25 hypothetical problem situations. The hypothetical situations included in their interviews were based on frequently-occurring and difficult-to-handle problems that were identified from a series of studies conducted by Farrell and colleagues. Farrell et al. (2005a) conducted individual interviews with adolescent students, parents, school personnel (e.g., teachers, administrators, security guards, cafeteria workers, and bus drivers), and staff working at community centers. Results of the study identified 39 types of problems that occurred in peer, family, school, and neighborhood contexts, and involved friends, classmates, parents, and teachers. Fifty-six percent of these problems involved peers, and eight involved either physical, verbal, or relational victimization. Erwin et al. (2005) selected 25 of the problem situations that represented problems that occurred frequently, and were rated by participants as difficult to handle. Youth were presented with three of the problem situations, and were interviewed regarding how they would, how they should, and how they thought their peers would respond to each of the three problems. In addition, they identified the goals underlying their responses, as well as their emotional reactions to the situations. Through constant comparison, an iterative process involving rigorous grouping and re-grouping of coded text, Erwin and colleagues (2005) defined prosocial coping as behaviors, thoughts, values, beliefs, or cognitive processes that aimed to either

solve the problem, or alleviate stress associated with the problem without the use of aggression. Prosocial coping was clearly guided by prosocial motives, such as staying out of trouble, staying safe, and sparing the feelings of others. Examples included seeking social support from peers or adults, and active problem-solving. Conversely, aggressive coping was defined as behaviors, thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, and cognitive processes that increased the likelihood of aggressive responding. Examples included hitting, threatening, spreading rumors, talking back, and verbal abuse (Erwin et al., 2005).

Erwin and colleagues' (2005) conceptualization of prosocial coping is similar to that of approach strategies; both aim to use problem-solving and social support to actively change the stressor. However, prosocial coping techniques must be motivated by prosocial values (e.g., it is important to think through a problem before reacting), which is not implicit in the traditional definition of approach coping. Further, Erwin and colleagues (2005) differentiated aggressive strategies from other avoidant coping techniques. In the approach/avoidant model, aggressive coping strategies are characterized as avoidant, since in many cases they are reactive in nature and address emotional distress rather than the stressor itself (e.g., hitting someone because of anger). However, there are important qualitative differences between aggressive coping and other types of avoidant coping strategies that highlight their need to be examined separately in the literature. This qualitative difference is demonstrated by Causey and Dubow (1992), who found that externalizing coping behaviors were only moderately correlated with other avoidant strategies, such as distancing, with $r = .23$. Combining aggressive coping strategies with other forms of avoidant coping is misleading due to the qualitative differences in these

strategies. Unfortunately, Erwin et al. (2005) did not include an analysis of avoidant coping strategies in their study: all coping responses that could not be defined as prosocial or aggressive were excluded from the qualitative analysis. However, examining the distinction between all three types of coping responses (prosocial, aggressive, and avoidant) is important in light of recent violence prevention efforts.

Research has demonstrated that the use of prosocial coping strategies in response to peer victimization is indicative of positive adjustment. For instance, Phelps (2001) found that use of problem-solving and support seeking in response to overt and relational victimization predicted higher rates of positive peer interactions. Vernberg and colleagues (1995) found that adolescent girls who did not seek out social support from same-aged peers or adults had higher parent-reported ratings of internalizing and externalizing problems. In addition, Kochenderfer and Ladd (1997) found that boys who were stable victims (i.e., victimized in the fall and spring) were more likely to report use of aggressive coping when compared to boys who were only victimized in the fall. In contrast, fall-victimized boys who responded by having a friend help were less likely to report being victimized one year later. These studies support the notion that there are psychosocial benefits to responding to peer aggression prosocially, just as there are risks associated with responding to bullies aggressively. Thus, understanding what factors contribute to (supports), and what factors inhibit (barriers) the use of prosocial coping responses is important for the primary and tertiary prevention of peer victimization.

Factors Influencing Prosocial Coping

Considering the transactional nature of interpersonal relationships is of the utmost importance when studying conflict and coping (Lerner, Rothbaum, Boulos, & Castellino, 2002). Adolescents are faced with a number of emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and social factors as they cope with peer victimization. Examining what factors influence whom and how is an important aspect of promoting prosocial coping for adolescents dealing with victimization.

Erwin et al. (2005) defined barriers as factors that inhibit, impede, or make it difficult for an individual to engage in a particular response when faced with conflict. They found that barriers influence coping, and can be both internal (e.g., attitudes, self-confidence) and external (e.g., lack of social support, presence of an audience). Conversely, supports were defined as factors that facilitate an individual's effort to engage in a particular coping behavior when facing a challenging situation. Like barriers, supports can be internal or external factors that influence coping. The purpose of their qualitative study was to identify barriers and supports to prosocial coping in response to 25 problem situations across internal, family, peer, school, and neighborhood contexts.

The authors conducted a five-step analytic process that involved: (a) sorting data into "chunks" that represented coherent themes, (b) organizing themes into a hierarchical structure, (c) resolving the classification of "challenging" interview segments that were not easily coded by an existing theme, (d) developing themes and refining definitions, (e) collapsing or merging themes when possible, and (f) ensuring that the data were coded consistently with the emergent theme definitions. Through this process, interview

segments were categorized as supports for prosocial coping, barriers to prosocial coping, supports for aggressive coping, or barriers to aggressive coping. Data pertaining to other avoidant techniques (e.g., crying, doing nothing) were not included in their analysis. Factors that influenced the use of prosocial coping included internal factors (emotion regulation, problem-solving skills, self-efficacy, and heuristics) and interpersonal factors (presence of an audience, peer pressure, image protection, and social support). Although the problem situations examined by Erwin and her colleagues (2005) did not focus exclusively on peer victimization, it is likely that similar factors influence coping with peer aggression. Hence, literature pertaining to how these factors relate to peer victimization will be reviewed in this section. Internal factors will be discussed first, followed by interpersonal factors.

Emotion Regulation. Experiences of peer victimization are associated with a number of negatively-valenced emotions, including anger, fear, sadness, shame, and loneliness (Boulton & Underwood, 1992; Graham et al., 2003; Hanish et al., 2004; Prinstein et al., 2001). Cole, Martin, and Dennis (2004) accentuated the importance of differentiating between emotional valence and emotion regulation. According to the authors, assuming that positive emotional experiences will promote healthy adjustment whereas negative emotional experiences will interfere with psychosocial functioning is an overly simplistic view that has been conveyed in previous child development literature. Instead, they emphasize the importance of examining emotion regulation, which is conceptualized as

...a tool to understand how emotions organize attention and activity and

facilitate strategic, persistent, or powerful actions to overcome obstacles, solve problems, and maintain well-being at the same time as they may impair reasoning and planning, complicate and compromise interpersonal interactions and relationships, and endanger health (Cole et al., 2004, pp. 318).

The valence and intensity of the emotional response, and the ability to regulate the emotional experience may influence the way in which youth choose to cope with victimization. In a series of studies, Eisenberg and colleagues (Eisenberg, Fabes, Guthrie, & Reiser, 2000; Eisenberg, Fabes, Karbon, Murphy, Wosinski, Polazzi, et al., 1996; Eisenberg, Fabes, Shepard, Murphy, Guthrie, Jones, et al., 1997) demonstrated that young children who were skilled at regulating their emotions were considered by their peers, teachers, parents, and themselves to be adept socially, display more empathetic and prosocial behavior, have higher peer status, and experience fewer behavioral problems and negative emotions than their peers who were less skilled at regulating their emotions. When confronted with conflict, individuals with an optimal style of emotion regulation are able to employ proactive and problem-focused coping strategies (Eisenberg et al., 2000). Hence, these children have less negative experiences with their peers, but when they do they are able to appropriately regulate their emotional response, enabling them to respond to victimization effectively and prosocially (Schwartz, Proctor, & Chien, 2001).

In contrast, highly inhibited individuals are over-restrained emotionally, and experience higher levels of frequent and intense negative emotions, especially those relating to internalizing problems (e.g. fearfulness, anxiety, social timidity, and excessive shyness) (Bates, Bayles, Bennett, Ridge, & Brown, 1991; Weinberger & Schwartz, 1990).

Inhibited individuals generally use avoidant strategies to cope with stress, such as self-blame, and other internalizing behaviors (Eisenberg et al., 2000). The inability of inhibited individuals to adaptively regulate the emotional experience of victimization may lead to the perpetuation of the problem, as withdrawal and other internalizing problems are associated with chronic victimization in middle childhood (Hanish & Guerra, 2002). Erwin et al. (2005) found that some adolescents identified fear and embarrassment as barriers to engaging in active coping strategies. Students spoke of feeling too embarrassed to try to do something about their situation, or were afraid that taking action would make the problem worse or cause retaliation by the person involved in the conflict. Hence, Erwin and colleagues (2005) concluded that the inability to regulate intense, negative emotions impeded students' self-efficacy beliefs and likelihood that they would cope prosocially with victimization.

On the other end of the spectrum, undercontrolled individuals generally exhibit poor problem-solving skills, and more frequently reported externalizing coping strategies in response to stress (Eisenberg et al., 2000). Ineffective emotion regulation in victimized children has been linked to the use of aggressive coping skills. Schwartz, Dodge, Pettit, and Bates (1997) examined the relation between peer victimization and emotion regulation in a sample of eight-year-old African-American children. They found that frequent victims of peer aggression were more likely to react aggressively than their non-victimized peers. Similarly, in the qualitative study conducted by Erwin and colleagues (2005), youth identified poor emotion regulation skills, particularly the inability to control anger, as a barrier to prosocial coping. Respondents often referred to "feeling like they were going to

explode” in response to situations across all domains. They found that emotion-driven, impulsive reactions often impeded generation of alternative coping strategies in students who stated they would respond aggressively to the hypothetical problem situations. The negative relation between ineffective emotion regulation and the generation or enactment of prosocial coping responses increases the risk for mistreatment by peers (Price & Dodge, 1989; Schwartz, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1997). Reactive, highly intense emotional responses are reinforcing to bullies (Perry, Willard, & Perry, 1990), and the inability to control anger perpetuates a vicious cycle of peer victimization and reactive aggression (Hanish et al., 2004). It is likely that victimization elicits a negative emotional response, and the youth’s ability to regulate this emotional response will impact his or her ability to cope prosocially with the victimization event.

Social Problem-solving. Social problem-solving is a complex cognitive process that individuals enact in order to make sense of their environment. Crick and Dodge’s social information processing model (1994) is particularly useful for considering the role of problem-solving in coping with peer victimization. This model posits that social information processing occurs in six steps: (a) the encoding of external and internal cues, (b) interpretation and mental representation of these cues, (c) selection or modification of a goal, (d) generation of possible responses based either on previous responses or novel responses, (e) selection of a response, and (f) initiation of the behavior. Children selectively attend to particular cues and external and internal events, and only the cues that are attended to are encoded and interpreted. The selection of cues that are attended to and subsequently interpreted is made by a series of independent processes, such as memories

of previous social exchanges with the other person involved in the event, self-evaluation and peer-evaluation, and perspective taking (Crick and Dodge, 1994). Researchers have argued that bullies, victims, and aggressive-victims exhibit deficits or biases at one or more of the six stages (Sanders, 2004). Problem-solving is an essential component of coping. Hence, deficits in one or more of these stages will greatly influence cognitive and behavioral aspects of coping, and will impact an adolescents' decisions to cope in a prosocial, aggressive, or avoidant way.

Gouze (1987) found that aggressive preschool students exhibited biases in the first and fourth steps of the social information processing model, which involve encoding social cues, and the generation of solutions. Their predominantly Caucasian sample consisted of male kindergarten students whose parents were either working or middle class. The researchers presented their participants with hypothetical interpersonal problem situations (e.g., Boy B has a ball that Boy A wants. What should Boy A do?). Responses were coded for their content, as well as the number of solutions that were generated. In addition, each participant completed two attentional tasks that measured the child's ability to shift away from aggressive cues, and their tendency to be distracted by aggressive versus non-aggressive stimuli. Finally, teachers rated each participant on psychosocial adjustment, which included ratings of aggression. The results indicated that aggressive boys were less willing to shift their attention away from aggressive stimuli (e.g., a cartoon clip containing violence), and were more distracted by aggressive cartoons when compared to their non-aggressive counterparts. This demonstrates a bias in the first step of the social information processing model, suggesting that some children are more attune to aggressive cues than

others. The authors also found that aggressive boys generated more solutions than their non-aggressive peers, but these solutions were more aggressive and less efficient. This finding conflicted with a previous study in which aggressive boys generated fewer alternatives to hypothetical peer problems (Richard & Dodge, 1982). Nevertheless, findings from both studies point to variability in the generation of solutions to hypothetical peer problems, and these differences may relate to the tendency to respond aggressively.

Camodeca and colleagues (2003) found that bully-victims exhibit deficits in clarifying and interpreting social information, and response selection. In their longitudinal study, third and fourth grade students from the Netherlands were assessed at two time points during the academic year. *Bully, victim, bully/victim, or not involved* status was assessed by peer nomination at both time points. Additionally, social information processing was measured by providing participants with hypothetical situations involving peer problems. During the first assessment phase, students were asked to provide solutions to the hypothetical problems. Emotions and attributions of intent were assessed during the second phase. During both time points, participants were asked to imagine themselves as the victim in each of the hypothetical situations. Solutions from the first phase of data were coded, and five categories of coping responses emerged: (a) aggression, (b) assertiveness, (c) asking for help from teachers or peers, (d) avoidance, and (e) irrelevance (e.g., the response did not fit the question or make sense). Their results indicated that bully/victims attributed more blame to the perpetrator, and became angrier with them as well. Further, members of the bully/victim group were more likely than members of the other groups to retaliate, demonstrating a deficit in the fifth step of the model. Contrary to their hypothesis,

victimized youth were not different from their non-victimized peers in terms of attributing hostile intent. The authors suggested that this may be explained by the tendency for victims to self-blame rather than attribute the problem to the perpetrator. Finally, stable bullies (e.g., those who were identified by their peers as bullies at both assessment points) generated the greatest number of irrelevant solutions when compared to their unstable counterparts, suggesting that this group of children have deficits in the ability to generate effective solutions.

Similar studies have found that aggressive youth are more likely to attribute hostile intent to the other person involved in an interpersonal situation, even when the intent is ambiguous, such as being bumped in the school hallway (Crick & Dodge, 1994). Hostile attribution bias is evident in children who are victimized by their peers. Schwartz and colleagues (1998) observed several play groups consisting of 6 African-American boys in the third grade. Each participant was rated for his or her level of victimization, proactive aggression, reactive aggression, and assertive behavior. In addition to observational data, social-cognitive interviews were conducted to assess social information processing skill. Results indicated that victimization was positively correlated with a tendency to attribute hostile intentions even in neutral situations, and also associated with reactive aggression. Researchers speculated that problems with attributional biases may lead to deficits and distortions in cognitive processes later in the model, such as generating alternatives, identifying goals, perceiving how others feel, and predicting the results of one's actions on others (Crick & Dodge, 1994).

In addition to deficits in the interpretation of intent attributions of others (e.g., hostile attribution bias), Prinstein and colleagues (2005) demonstrated that some youth may exhibit biased self-referent attributions. For instance, some children have the propensity to attribute fault to themselves when experiencing a negative social event (e.g., I was excluded from the party because I am not any fun). The authors assessed hostile intent attributions, critical self-referent interpretations, peer status, and psycho-social functioning in a predominantly Caucasian sample of kindergarten students. The first two constructs were assessed using hypothetical situations with illustrations that were administered verbally to the participants. Peer status was assessed by peer nominations, in which peers identified classmates who were well-liked, disliked, happy, sad, victimized, and withdrawn. Finally, psycho-social functioning was measured through teacher report. The authors found that children's tendency to make critical self-referent attributions from ambiguous peer experiences is associated with negative peer experiences, such as social rejection or victimization. Results also found that negative interpretations about the self were related to engagement in maladaptive social behaviors, which may perpetuate social rejection and victimization.

The propensity to assign self-blame during negative peer interactions may influence social goals and social behavior (Rubin & Rose-Krasnor, 1992), and may also influence coping style. For instance, Quiggle et al. (1992) found that children who attribute social failure to their own inadequacies are socially withdrawn and passive, and may be less proactive in their coping choices. Additional studies have demonstrated an association between critical self-referent attributions and internalizing symptoms, such as depression,

anxiety, and withdrawal (Prinstein et al., 2005; Suarez & Bell-Dolan, 2001). Hence, the propensity to self-blame may inhibit participants from engaging in prosocial coping processes, and may perpetuate the use of avoidant or internalizing responses.

Cognitive scripts/Heuristics. Scripts can be conceptualized as mental structures that organize individuals' perceptions and beliefs about particular situations, and guide their expectations as to how the situation will conclude (Abelson, 1981). Fagan and Wilkinson (1998) summarized research conducted over the past 30 years into a theory of how scripts influence adolescent decision making: (a) scripts offer the adolescent a way to organize observed and experienced events and the behavioral choices they make at these events, (b) adolescents learn behavioral repertoires for different situations, (c) with repeated exposure, these repertoires are stored in cognitive scripts and are elicited by associated environmental cues, (d) individuals differ on the number of scripts they possess, and also differ on their reliance on them, (e) individuals are more likely to repeat scripted behaviors if their experience with it was successful in either the short term or long term, and (f) with repeated use, scripted behavior becomes automated and rash.

Huesmann (1988) argued that scripts influence the way that children cope with provocation due to their relationship with normative beliefs. He argued that normative beliefs regulate the activation of scripts by providing the individual with moral guidelines about the acceptability or unacceptability of engaging in certain coping behaviors, such as retaliation. In a later study, Huesmann and Guerra (1997) tested this model in an ethnically-diverse sample of elementary school students in low-income neighborhoods. Normative beliefs about retaliation and general beliefs about the use of aggression were

assessed using a self-report measure in which students were presented with hypothetical situations involving verbal and physical peer aggression (e.g., “Suppose a girl says something bad to another girl, Mary. Is it okay for Mary to scream at her? Is it okay for Mary to hit her?”). They found a significant direct relation between normative beliefs favoring aggression and self-, peer-, and teacher-rated aggressive behavior in the older children, suggesting that normative beliefs guide decisions regarding the use of aggression as a coping technique.

Vernberg, Jacobs, and Hershberger (1999) found similar results in a predominantly Caucasian sample of adolescents; positive attitudes towards aggression were predictive of engagement in aggressive acts. Interestingly, they found that adolescents who were frequently victimized by their peers acted aggressively towards peers even when their personal beliefs about aggression were unfavorable. However, youth who experienced moderate amounts of victimization were less likely to aggress against their peers if they had unfavorable attitudes towards aggression. Graham and Juvonen (1998) demonstrated that scripts and normative beliefs influence non-aggressive avoidant strategies as well. In their study, youth who were chronically victimized were more likely to blame themselves for the victimization than were less victimized peers. This self-blame led to internalizing coping behaviors, such as rumination and avoidance. These results highlight the need to further examine the role of attitudes and normative beliefs in coping behaviors of victimized children.

Self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's perceived ability to handle social situations and interactions competently. Confidence in one's ability to handle conflict is an important predictor of engagement in action-oriented coping strategies (Erwin et al., 2005). According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy requires a combination of self-beliefs regarding knowledge about acceptable social behavior, confidence in one's ability to behave in accordance with these rules, and faith that following these social rules will result in social acceptance. Bandura (1986) argued that social self-efficacy develops as a function of positive social experiences and mastery of social skills, and through direct or indirect feedback from members of the social group regarding social behaviors and competence. Hence, social self-efficacy is dependent on the quality of the social interactions experienced by the individual.

In general, victimized children lack social competence, and by definition experience a higher number of negative social interactions than their less victimized peers (Hodges, Malone, & Perry, 1997). Given the negativity implicit in the social experiences of victims of peer aggression, it is not surprising that perceived self-efficacy is affected by experiences of victimization. Egan and Perry (1998) conducted a study with a predominantly Caucasian, middle-class sample of third-through-seventh graders in an effort to establish a link between self-reported self-efficacy and victimization. Results of their study indicated that low perceived self-efficacy predicted increases in victimization over the school year after controlling for level of victimization in the fall, gender, and age. The authors concluded that perceived self-efficacy contributes to victimization by fostering a sense of social failure and inadequacy, which in turn leads to behaviors undesirable to the

peer group (e.g., social withdrawal, timidity), increasing the vulnerability of being targeted by peer aggressors.

Self-efficacy influences coping behaviors in many ways. First, perceived self-efficacy is related to whether an individual will actively pursue solving the problem, the energy the individual is willing to exert to solve the problem, and how long the individual will persevere in attempting to resolve the problem (Bandura, 1986). Further, self-efficacy influences the effectiveness of coping strategies, since individuals with low self-efficacy are more likely to abort their strategies prematurely, whereas individuals with high self-efficacy generally persevere longer and attempt more than one strategy (Bandura, 1986). Individuals with low perceived self-efficacy likely become stuck in a vicious cycle of ineffective coping; experiences of unsuccessful coping attempts influence perceptions of self-efficacy, which in turn influence the motivation and energy expended in coping with subsequent stressful situations. Bandura's (1986) theory is easily applied to victimized children: repeated negative peer experiences deflate perceptions of self-efficacy, resulting in low motivation or confidence in solving the problem. Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, and Bukowski (1999) demonstrated that low perceived self-efficacy and poor self-esteem lead to increases in victimization over time. It is plausible that youth with low self-efficacy experience self-defeating thoughts and affect when they are being victimized, causing them to either withdraw or aggress ineffectively, encouraging future victimization (Perry, Hodges, & Egan, 2001).

Presence of Bystanders. Being alone with the other person involved in the conflict was one of the most frequently coded supports for prosocial coping in the Erwin et al. (2005) study. Conversely, the presence of an audience was one of the most frequently coded barriers to prosocial coping. The presence of bystanders is likely to inhibit the ability for the individuals involved in the conflict from regulating their emotions, and enacting action-oriented problem-solving processes (Erwin et al., 2005). Often, bystanders escalate the intensity of the problem situation, and encourage aggression and violence on the part of those involved in the conflict for their own vicarious pleasure (Fagan & Wilkinson, 1998). Hence, the individuals involved in the conflict feel pressured to respond aggressively as a way to protect their reputation (Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003). This may be particularly true in the case of peer victimization, given the social nature of the bully/victim relationship. Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Berts, & King (1982) emphasized the social nature of bullying, describing peer harassment as a collective activity that, in part, is based on social relationships within the peer group. In many instances, bullying occurs in front of members of the peer group, and even if some members are not involved in the actual attack, most are aware of the bullying process (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkvist, Osterman, & Kaukianen, 1996). The social aspect of peer victimization likely limits the opportunity for the victim to reconcile with the bully in private.

Salmivalli and colleagues (1996) demonstrated the role that bystanders play in situations involving peer harassment. In a sample of Finnish seventh and eighth grade students, 87% of the students played some role in instances of bullying that occurred at their school. The study indicated that bystanders kept themselves out of the situation,

attempted to help the victim, reinforced the bully by laughing or promoting the bullying behavior, or even helped the bully harass the victim. Girls were more likely than boys to stay out of the situation (40% versus 7%), or try to help the victim (30% vs. 5%), whereas boys were more likely than girls to reinforce the bully (37% vs. 2%) or assist the bully in harassing the victim (12% vs. 1%). These results emphasize the social nature of peer victimization, and it is easy to imagine that bystanders would inhibit the ability for victims to engage in prosocial coping. Moreover, due to the low social status of victimized youth (Perry and Egan, 1988), it may be difficult for victims to solicit or obtain help from bystanders.

Image Protection and Peer Pressure. The fact that peer victimization often occurs in a social context may further inhibit the victim from using prosocial coping strategies due to the need to promote one's image or reputation. In many ways, adolescent culture favors aggression and deviance, and this social norm may motivate children to stray from conventional, prosocial coping strategies in favor of aggressive strategies that may promote social status (Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003).

The way in which aggression can serve to promote social status was demonstrated by Miller-Johnston et al. (2003). They showed in a sample of African-American, seventh-grade students that youth who effectively use aggression as a way to get what they want are generally considered popular by their peers. Miller-Johnston and colleagues found that "controversial" children, characterized by high levels of social acceptance and popularity despite their aggressive behavior, were highly visible among their peers, and were reported to be the most influential in shaping peer behavioral norms. The authors dubbed this

subgroup of children as “trendsetters,” as it appeared that other students looked to the norms of this subgroup to shape their own behavior and beliefs regarding risky behavior (Miller-Johnson et al., 2003).

These findings are surprising because, in general, aggressive youth are rejected or victimized by their peers (Ladd, 1999). However, recent studies have differentiated between proactive and reactive aggression (Dodge, Lochman, Harnish, Bates, & Pettit, 1997). Proactive aggression is a learned aggressive behavior, which is used in order to achieve a desired goal (e.g., social status). Proactive aggression usually lacks an emotional component, and requires a certain level of social skill to be effective. Conversely, reactive aggression is provoked by negative emotional arousal (e.g., anger in response to victimization), and has been linked with poor social skill and status. It is hypothesized that proactively aggressive youth retain high social status, although they are not necessarily liked by their peers (Fagan & Wilkinson, 1998). On the other hand, reactively aggressive youth are generally socially rejected and disliked (Fagan & Wilkinson, 1998). Hence, the “trendsetters” identified by Miller-Johnson and colleagues (2003) were likely proactively aggressive, explaining their high social status despite their aggressive behavior. Similar results regarding the acceptability of proactive aggression were found in a predominantly middle-class Caucasian sample of tenth grade students (Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003).

Prinstein and Cillessen (2003) found that high levels of peer-rated reputational aggression predicted high levels of popularity. In a follow-up study conducted 17 months later, the authors found that popularity was related to increased trajectories of reputationally aggressive behaviors over time, suggesting that reputational aggression may

serve as a way to maintain or promote popularity. Involvement in a social milieu that values physical and relational aggression may serve not only to perpetuate peer victimization, but also to motivate victims to try aggressive responses in an effort to enhance their social status. This may be especially true for youth growing up in poor, urban environments where aggression is often equated with masculinity and power (Fagan & Wilkinson, 1998).

Social Support. Studies have consistently shown that youth identify seeking social support as an important and successful coping option (for review, see Fields & Prinz, 1998). Seeking social support is perceived by researchers to be an active, prosocial coping technique (Causey & Dubow, 1992; Erwin et al., 2005) that is motivated by both problem-focused and emotion-focused goals. For instance, youth who seek social support in the face of victimization can simultaneously receive advice as to what to do in the situation (problem-focused), and be comforted by the supporter (emotion-focused). Kliewer, Lepore, Oskin, and Johnson (1998) highlighted that social support is particularly important for children and adolescents because they may have more trouble articulating and understanding traumatic events, such as victimization, and they may have fewer coping sources available to them than do adults. Victimized youth have identified friends and family members as important sources of social support.

Research has demonstrated that parental support plays an important role in peer victimization. Finnegan, Hodges, and Perry (1998) demonstrated that middle school girls who did not have supportive parental relationships were at an increased risk of being victimized by their peers. In fact, the threat of maternal rejection was the strongest

predictor of peer victimization. This finding is particularly alarming in that lack of maternal support puts youth at risk for being victimized by their peers, and also means that if they are victimized, they have one less mechanism available to them for coping with experiences of peer harassment.

The availability of parental support decreases the likelihood that youth will cope with victimization by exhibiting internalizing or externalizing behaviors. Quamma and Greenberg (1994) demonstrated that perceived parental support buffered the development of internalizing and externalizing behaviors associated with school and life stressors, which included social exclusion and victimization. However, the buffering effects of parental support may only be beneficial for girls. Kochenderfer-Ladd and Skinner (2002) demonstrated that in middle childhood, victimized boys who sought social support from their parents as a way to cope with victimization experienced lower social preference scores than students who coped in other ways. Interestingly, however, non-victimized boys who sought parental support had higher social preference scores. Girls who sought parental support as a way to cope with their problems reported better psychological adjustment than non-supported peers, regardless of their victimization status. These findings highlight the fact that not all students have supportive relationships with their parents. Further, social pressures may inhibit victimized boys from seeking help from their parents even if they have close, nurturing relationships with them. Hence, the use of parental support as a coping response may be inhibited in these ways.

Support from friends and peers is also an important coping resource for youth dealing with peer victimization. Having friends protects individuals from being targets of

peer harassment (Hodges, Malone, & Perry, 1997). Bullies are less likely to victimize youth who have friends for fear of physical or relational retaliation from the friend group (Perry, Hodges, & Egan, 2001). Kochenderfer and Ladd (1996) demonstrated that boys who had a friend help in the event of peer victimization were less likely to experience recurrent instances of peer victimization, and that this source of social support was more effective at preventing future attacks than aggressive retaliation.

Having friends not only deters bullies from attacking, but also ensures the availability of a peer support network in the event that harassment does occur. Unfortunately, the friendship groups of chronically-victimized youth may not have the same protective qualities as friendship groups of less victimized individuals. For instance, the friends of victimized youth are more likely to be victimized themselves (Cicchetti & Bukowski, 1995; Hodges et al., 1997), limiting the amount of protection or support that they can offer. Further, friendships among victimized youth are characterized by higher levels of conflict than those of non-victimized youth (Perry, Hodges & Egan, 2001), which may make this source of support less reliable. These studies point to the variability among the level and quality of peer support available to adolescents. This variability will impact the degree to which adolescents seek social support as a way to cope with interpersonal problems, and the effectiveness of using social support as a coping resource. Differences in the quality and availability of social support, and the impact that this has on coping have been addressed in the social acceptance literature.

Social Acceptance and Victimization

As discussed previously, seeking social support is an important option for youth who are dealing with interpersonal problems. However, not all students have friends and peers from whom they can seek help. The extent to which adolescents are accepted by their peers affects their experiences of victimization, psychosocial adjustment, development of social competence, and cognitive and behavioral processes (Dodge et al., 2003; Reisman, 1985). Understanding the different social contexts from which an adolescent approaches a victimization event is essential for predicting and interpreting the youth's coping choice. This section will describe the different levels of social acceptance that have been empirically identified in the literature, and will summarize studies that demonstrate the effects of social acceptance on experiences of victimization and associated coping processes.

Children who are disliked by their peers (e.g., children who are nominated by their classmates as being disliked or avoided) are referred to as peer rejected in the literature (e.g., Perry, Hodges, & Egan, 2001). A substantial number of studies support the notion that peer rejection is a significant stressor for youth that leads to negative psychosocial outcomes (for review, see Coie, Dodge, & Kupersmidt, 1990). For instance, prospective longitudinal studies have consistently shown that peer rejection is a unique predictor of subsequent internalizing and externalizing problems (Boivin, Hymel, & Bukowski, 1995; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1998). Peer rejected children share many of the negative psychosocial consequences of victimized children (Schuster, 2001). Like victimization,

peer rejection has been associated with depression, loneliness, and aggression (Boivin, Hymel, & Bukowski, 1995; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1998).

The similarity in outcomes between youth who are victimized and those who are socially rejected is not surprising because the two constructs empirically overlap. For example, Schuster (1999) conducted a study in which participants identified youth who were rejected in their classroom, and those who were victimized. Results indicated a significant correlation ($r = .52$) between being nominated as rejected and being nominated for victimization. Further, almost all of the youth who were nominated as victimized were also nominated as rejected (82%). Boivin and Hymel (1997) found similar results in their study of French Canadian children, aged 8-10 years. In their study, social status and victimization were highly correlated ($r = -.68$), such that youth who were nominated by peers as rejected were also nominated as victimized.

Despite this connection between peer rejection and victimization, the two constructs are distinct concepts (Schuster, 2001). As Schuster (2001) explained, peers do not necessarily intend to harm youth who are rejected, representing an important difference in the social experiences between victimized-rejected and rejected youth. In fact, one study found that of 48 students nominated by peers as rejected, 30 were not victimized. Generally, victimized-rejected children demonstrate greater levels of psychosocial maladjustment than rejected youth, particularly rejected-victims who retaliate against their assailant (Hanish et al., 2004).

The differences between peer rejection and peer victimization were demonstrated by Farrell and colleagues (2005b) in a study of 176 predominantly African-American

middle school students. Participants completed self-report questionnaires that assessed their level of peer victimization, perceived social acceptance, depression, anxiety, and aggression. Profiles of students were empirically identified based on aggregate scores on physical and relational victimization, physical and relational aggression, perceived social acceptance, depression, and anxiety. A hierarchical clustering technique was used to generate initial cluster centers for solutions ranging from two to five clusters. Examination of the dendrogram identified a probable three- or four- cluster solution. Based on theoretical considerations, a four-cluster solution was selected, identifying four classifications of students: passive-victims, aggressive-victims, neglected, and well-adjusted. *Passive-victims* were characterized by high levels of internalizing problems and relational victimization, and low on levels of aggression, and peer acceptance. *Aggressive-victims* scored high on measures of aggression, internalizing problems, overt victimization, and relational victimization, and low on measures of peer acceptance. *Neglected* students scored low on levels of overt and relational aggression, internalizing problems, externalizing behaviors, and peer acceptance. *Well-adjusted* students scored high on levels of peer acceptance, but low on aggression and victimization. The results of the cluster analysis support Schuster's (2001) conclusion that peer rejection and victimization are two distinct constructs, since youth who scored low on peer acceptance were not necessarily exposed to peer victimization. Further studies are needed to clarify the similarities and differences between these subgroups; particularly whether these students cope with social stressors differently.

Research suggests that rejected youth may have particular difficulty effectively coping with peer problems. Parkhurst and Asher (1992) conducted a study that examined coping ability in a predominantly middle-class, Caucasian sample of middle school students. The researchers grouped participants into three clusters based on social status: average, aggressive-rejected, and submissive-rejected. Unfortunately, they did not differentiate between victimized and non-victimized rejected youth. Nevertheless, they found differences in coping abilities among the three groups of participants. When compared with average students, children who were classified as aggressive-rejected were rated higher on the items “starts fights,” “disrupts,” and “can’t take teasing,” and lower on items “easy to push around,” “cooperates,” and “someone you can trust.” Conversely, when compared to average students, children in the submissive-rejected group were rated higher on items “easy to push around,” and “can’t take teasing,” and lower on items “starts fights,” “cooperates,” and “someone you can trust.” These results indicate that in comparison to average children, rejected youth have a difficult time coping with teasing in a socially-acceptable way. Their lack of coping skills in response to victimization may reinforce the bullies’ behavior and result in continued peer harassment (Perry, Willard, & Perry, 1990).

Social rejection contributes to a social atmosphere that inhibits the peer socialization process, limiting the opportunities for rejected youth to develop age-appropriate coping skills. Ladd (1983) demonstrated in a sample of third and fourth grade students that children who were rejected by their peers spent less time engaging in prosocial interactions and more time in conflicted interactions than average and popular

children. Similarly, Putallaz and Wasserman (1990) found that rejected children spend a larger proportion of their social interactions with younger and unpopular peers than do popular and average children. Further, their social networks were comprised of significantly fewer members (Putallaz & Wasserman, 1990). Thus, socially rejected children had less opportunity to practice social skills, and were interacting with less-skilled peers. In addition, it is difficult for rejected youth to improve their social status. Peers maintain biases against children who have been socially rejected and continue to exclude them even if the offensive behavior of the rejected child changes (Hymel, Wagner, & Butler, 1990). Hence, peer rejection is perpetuated by the inability for the rejected child to integrate into the social group. As a result, rejected children are less likely than accepted children to understand peer social norms (Dodge, McClasky, & Feldman, 1985), which likely exacerbates their social exclusion. Because they lack access to strong networks of social support, and their opportunities to learn and practice age-appropriate social behaviors are limited, rejected youth cope ineffectively with victimization (Perry, Willaird, & Perry, 1990).

The impact of social rejection on social information processing may also influence the use of ineffective coping. The repetition of negative social interactions inherent in rejected and victimized youth results in social information processing deficits. Dodge and colleagues demonstrated that for children who have experienced chronic peer rejection, the development of the skills needed to accurately appraise a situation and generate possible solutions to an event may be disrupted (Dodge et al., 2003). In an ethnically-diverse sample of elementary school children, students who were rejected at Year 1 of the study

were more likely to exhibit later hostile attribution biases, and skills deficits in both generating potential solutions, and following through on socially-competent solutions. This association was significant even after early social information processing ability was taken into account, indicating that low social preference led to changes in social information processing over time. Thus, rejected children are more likely than non-rejected children to have deficits in problem-solving skills, which may inhibit the use of prosocial or approach-type coping.

Peer rejection likely interferes with the rejected child's ability to seek social support in response to victimization. Schuster (2001) conducted a study with a sample of fifth, seventh, and eleventh graders in which participants read hypothetical scenarios involving actual classmates committing social failures. The results indicated that participants were more likely to blame victimized-rejected and non-victimized-rejected classmates for their social failure compared with socially-accepted classmates. In contrast, the social failure of accepted classmates was attributed to external and situational factors. Similar results were found by Graham and Juvonen (2001). In their study, victimized youth were more likely to be blamed for their negative social experiences, and this attributional bias resulted in less support from peers when attempts were made to ward off the assailant.

From the literature, it is clear that social acceptance influences the incidence of victimization, coping skills (e.g., problem-solving, emotion regulation), and availability of coping resources (e.g., social support). It is therefore important for researchers examining how youth cope with peer victimization to be cognizant of the social resources available to

their participants. Examining how groups of youth who differ on their social experiences cope with peer victimization is an important step in identifying effective coping behaviors.

Gender, Peer Victimization, and Coping

Past research has identified significant gender differences in the type of victimization experienced, and coping behaviors in response to victimization. For example, Crick and Bigbee (1998) conducted a study that used self- and peer-reports to assess exposure to physical and relational forms of victimization in a sample of fourth and fifth grade students. The researchers classified participants into four groups: non-victims, relational victims, overt victims, and relational and overt victims. Their results indicated that whereas only 1% of the girls were the targets of overt victimization, 12% of girls had been the target of relational victimization. Overall, boys experienced more overt victimization than did girls (9%), and less relational victimization (3%). Similar results were found by Perry, Kusel, and Perry (1988) who found that though boys in middle school were more likely to be physically attacked by peers, boys and girls experienced similar levels of verbal abuse. However, gender differences dissipate among extremely victimized youth, such that boys and girls who are severely victimized experience similar levels of physical aggression (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996). In other words, severely victimized girls differ from their moderately-victimized peers by both type and frequency of victimization; they are not just targets of more frequent relational aggression, but also experience frequent exposure to physical aggression.

Gender differences in how youth cope with victimization have been discussed in the literature. Smith, Shu, and Madsen (2001) found that girls are most likely to respond to

peer victimization by internalizing behaviors and seeking social support. For instance, 27% of girls reported crying versus 8% of boys, and 22% of girls reported asking a friend for help versus 12% of boys. On the other hand, 29% of boys reported that they would fight back, whereas only 15% of girls indicated they would aggressively retaliate. Phelps (2001) found similar results in a sample of Caucasian students in the third through sixth grades. Girls engaged in more approach-oriented coping strategies and in internalizing strategies whereas boys engaged in more aggressive strategies. Both boys and girls used similar levels of distancing techniques, which were endorsed more frequently as strategies to cope with relational aggression. Given the consistency of gender differences in both the type of victimization experienced and the coping behaviors used to deal with harassment, it is important that future research acknowledge this difference and consider it during data analysis.

Chapter Three

Statement of the Problem

There is ample evidence in the existing psychological literature that peer victimization is a frequently occurring stressor for middle school students that is associated with a variety of maladaptive outcomes. However, our knowledge regarding how youth cope with peer victimization is limited. The majority of studies that have examined coping behaviors used by victimized youth have used measures and checklists generated by researchers aiming to test specific coping behaviors of interest. For instance, the most widely used coping scale developed by Causey and Dubow (1992) was developed specifically to test the relevance of approach-avoidant coping theory for adolescents. The items were generated exclusively by the researchers; adolescents were not consulted to determine whether these items adequately captured the breadth of their coping strategies. The widespread use of such scales has limited our knowledge of how youth cope with victimization.

Another limitation of the peer victimization literature is that most studies have used predominantly Caucasian samples of children from middle class backgrounds (Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Goodman, Stormshak, & Dishion, 2001; Phelps, 2001; Schwartz, Dodge, & Coie, 1993). As a result, little is known about the psychosocial impact of victimization on African-American youth. Further, no articles were identified that examined how African-American youth cope with victimization. Thorough and rigorous

investigations must be conducted on this historically marginalized population in an effort to understand and prevent instances of victimization among African-American youth.

Finally, no studies were identified that looked at predictors of prosocial coping in response to peer victimization. This is of considerable concern because the goal of many violence prevention programs is to promote non-aggressive, prosocial conflict resolution skills. Rarely have researchers attempted to determine the mechanisms underlying the relation between peer victimization and maladjustment. However, understanding what factors influence prosocial coping is essential for interventionists working with victims of peer aggression.

This study proposes to address these limitations by using a mixture of qualitative and quantitative techniques to improve our understanding of how African-American youth cope with peer victimization. Mixed-methods designs refer to the use of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies when researching a phenomenon of interest (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). The major strength of mixed-methods designs is that they allow a thorough and comprehensive examination of the research questions in a way that limits methodological constraint (Morse, 2003). One approach to mixing qualitative and quantitative analytical techniques is counting themes (Crone & Teddlie, 1995; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Zimmerman, Samuals, Wong, Tarver, Rabiah, & White, 2004). Counting themes involves “quantizing” qualitative data by assigning each theme a frequency score representing the number of participants who mentioned it (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Counting themes allows the researcher to statistically analyze data that were initially emergent and qualitative in nature, adding greater legitimacy and less bias to the conclusions (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). In this way, the richness of qualitative

techniques and the unbiased nature of statistical techniques can maximize the interpretability and validity of the data.

Zimmerman and colleagues (2004) demonstrated how a mixed-method approach can be used in psychological research in their analysis of student essays on youth violence. They developed a multi-step analytic approach that first involved identifying emergent themes from essays written by high school students on the causes of youth aggression. Based on the literature, they assumed that individual, peer, family, and societal factors would emerge from the essays. Hence, coding involved identifying segments of transcripts that dealt with causes of youth violence, and categorizing the emergent themes into this a priori classification structure. Once emergent themes were identified and defined, the researchers created nominal level data for each theme by determining whether each individual respondent mentioned the target theme. In other words, each theme became a dichotomous variable, and the theme was assigned a “yes,” or “no” for each respondent, based on whether it was mentioned in the essay. By creating nominal-level data, the researchers were able to conduct chi-square analyses to determine whether girls and boys differed in the likelihood of mentioning a particular theme. Zimmerman et al. (2004) capitalized on the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative analytical techniques to determine how gender effects perceptions about the etiology of youth aggression.

This study will use a mixture of qualitative and quantitative techniques to address the following objectives: (a) to identify how middle school students cope with peer victimization, (b) determine whether boys and girls cope with victimization differently, (c) examine whether clusters of adolescents who differ in their social experiences cope

with victimization differently, (d) determine whether clusters of adolescents who differ in their social experiences differ on their perceptions of what should be done in response to peer victimization, and (e) identify barriers and supports to prosocial coping. Coping strategies were assessed through individual interviews that questioned individual students about how they believed they *would* respond to instances of peer victimization, and how they believed they *should* respond to peer victimization. In addition, students were asked to provide an overarching goal of how the situation would end, as well as the rationale behind their identified coping method. It was hypothesized that girls would be more likely to generate prosocial and avoidant coping strategies, whereas boys would be more likely to identify aggressive and avoidant strategies. In addition, it was expected that well-adjusted students would be most likely to generate prosocial coping strategies, rejected and passive-victims would be most likely to identify avoidant coping strategies, and provocative-victims will be more likely to elicit aggressive coping strategies. These hypotheses are summarized in Figures 1 and 2.

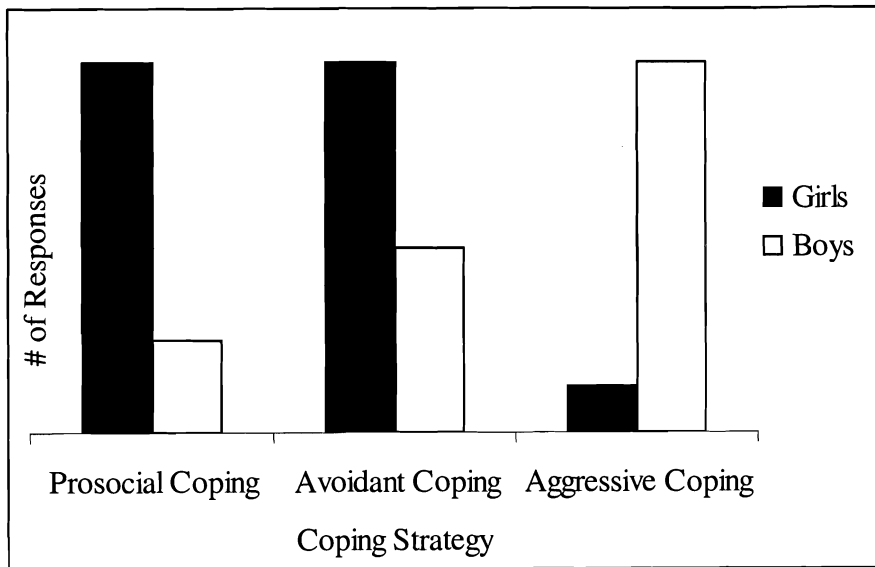


Figure 1: Predicted differences in coping strategies generated by girls and boys.

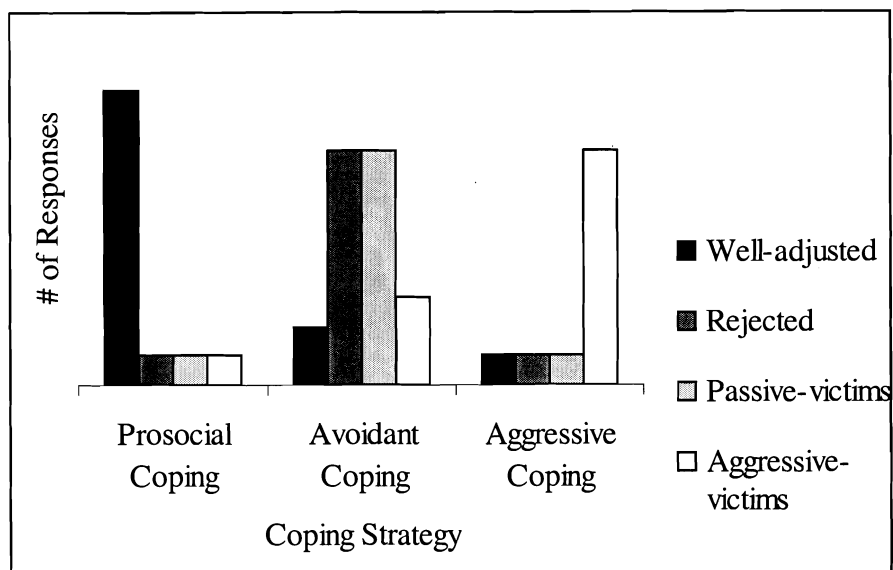


Figure 2: Predicted differences in coping strategies generated by members of different social clusters.

It was also hypothesized that there would be less variability in what students think they should do, or what they think is the right thing to do, in response to peer victimization. It was expected that most students would identify prosocial coping

strategies as the “right” thing to do. Alternative hypotheses were tested as rigorously as these predicted results in an effort to limit biased coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Chapter Four

Method

Setting and Participants

Data for this study were collected in the spring of 2003 as part of a larger series of studies (Farrell et al., 2005a; 2000b). This is the same dataset used by Erwin et al. (2005). Seventh and eighth grade students attending three schools in a large city in the Southeastern United States participated in individual interviews. The majority of students served by these schools are African-American, many of whom are from economically disadvantaged families in areas of the city characterized by high crime and dense pockets of poverty.

In the winter of 2003, 213 students were randomly selected to complete questionnaires in an effort to determine exposure to problem situations. Student and parental consent were obtained from 183 students, and 176 participated in the study, representing a participation rate of 83%. Participants were recruited from 11 randomly selected classrooms, including seven classrooms from the general education program, one classroom from the advanced placement program, two classrooms designated for students with learning disabilities, and one classroom designated for children with emotional disturbance. In addition to identifying their exposure to problem situations, participants also completed measures assessing their engagement in overt and relational aggression, exposure to peer victimization, depression, anxiety, and peer acceptance. As detailed earlier, cluster analyses were performed resulting in the identification of four subgroups

of children differing on social adjustment: well-adjusted, aggressive victims, passive victims, and rejected (Farrell et al., 2005b). A sub-sample of 130 students from the original sample of 178 was selected to participate in individual interviews, based on cluster membership and gender. Of these, 6 students were no longer attending the participating school at the time of the interview, and 2 students were unable to be located. Thus, 122 seventh and eighth graders were interviewed, the majority of whom described themselves as African-American (93%). Because the purpose of this study was to determine coping behaviors used by African-American adolescents to deal with peer victimization, only African-American participants who responded to hypothetical situations involving peer victimization were included in the final sample (N = 80). Just over half of the sample was female. The highest proportion of students was in the well-adjusted cluster, followed by passive-victims, rejected, and aggressive-victims, respectively. The proportion of students in these social clusters is consistent with existing literature (e.g., Hanish et al., 2004). All students assented and provided parental consent to participate in the study. Table 1 provides a summary of the demographic characteristics and cluster membership of the final sample.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics for the Sample

	N	%
Female	42	53%
Male	38	47%
Well-Adjusted	30	37%
Rejected	17	21%
Passive-Victims	19	24%
Aggressive-Victims	14	18%

Procedures

Interviewer training. Ten interviewers (six were African-American) completed six hours of formal training, comprised of lecture and discussion, readings, and role-plays of the interview protocol. The content of the training consisted of reviewing instructions to be read to the participants, the rights of human subjects, the semi-structured interview protocol, identification and procedures for reporting suspected child abuse and neglect, and developmental issues pertinent to early and middle adolescence. All interviewers audio-taped a mock interview that was reviewed by an investigator who provided verbal feedback. Transcriptions of actual interviews were also reviewed by an investigator to ensure fidelity to the research protocol.

Interviewing Procedures. Interviews were conducted at the participants' schools during elective classes in rooms that would ensure the student's privacy. All students had consent forms signed by their parents or legal guardians, and signed youth assent forms before participating in the interview. Respondents were presented with three problem situations that were randomly selected from a total of 25 situations. The randomization process used a computer program so that each situation was sampled within each social adjustment cluster. Each situation was presented to 12-17 participants. The 25 problem situations explored in these interviews were selected from the problem identification study reviewed previously in this proposal (Farrell et al., 2005a). For the present study, eight situations were selected that dealt with peer victimization, defined as: (a) the potential of the respondent to be physically harmed or threatened to be physically harmed; (b) the respondent being the target of hurtful manipulation or intentional damage

to peer relationships; or (c) the respondent being the target of verbal aggression that involves being teased and taunted by peers. These situations were as follows:

1. Other kids at school tease and pick on you. They call you names and make fun of you.
2. You and a friend are joking and cracking on each other. You accidentally say something that you didn't think would cross the line, but your friend gets really mad at you. You didn't mean it, you were just joking around but you crossed the line and now your friend wants to fight you for real.
3. Somebody is spreading a rumor about a student and you get blamed for it. Now you have a big problem with this person who thinks you were talking about them behind their back.
4. Someone started a rumor about you and other students are keeping it going and making the rumor worse. Now, it seems like all the kids are talking about you.
5. Another kid at school says something to you that is disrespectful about your family.
6. Two of your friends are fighting and they try to put you in the middle of it. You feel pressure from both sides because they can't get along, and they each want you to take their side.
7. You told a friend something private and they told it to other people. This friend had promised they wouldn't tell anyone, but went behind your back and told other people.

8. Someone is “fake” with you, sometimes acting like a friend and sometimes saying mean things about you. You can’t trust them because they change how they act all the time.

The format of the interview was semi-structured, in that interviewers were instructed to ask each child the same set of questions. The interviewers began each interview by stating the purpose, establishing the agenda, explaining confidentiality, and answering participants’ questions. Next, participants were presented with a problem situation card, which was read aloud by the interviewer. This card was displayed throughout the conversation to allow students the ability to refer back to the situation as needed. Participants were then asked a series of questions, including: (a) what they would likely do in the situation, (b) what would help them to do this (support), (c) what would keep them from doing this (barrier), (d) what most students their age would do, (e) what they think they should do, (f) what would help them do what they think they should do (support), and (g) what would keep them from doing what they think they should do. A complete protocol for the interviews is included in Appendix A. The interviewer’s role was directive in order to keep the participant on task with the interview, yet flexible enough to answer questions or word the questions differently in case the participant did not understand. When the interview was complete, participants were debriefed, and given a \$5 gift card to Target.

Transcription. Audio tapes of interviews were transcribed by the interviewers into Microsoft Word documents, and imported into the NUDIST (N6) software package (QSR International, 2002). N6 provides many advantages for analyzing qualitative data, including the ability to code and re-code data using a computer software system,

managing the process of analysis by keeping an automated audit trail of theme merges and separations, and providing a way for the researcher to organize theoretical models and hypotheses through the use of tree nodes (di Gregorio, 2003). All analyses were conducted using the N6 software package.

Coding. Coding was completed by two graduate students, both of whom had received training on qualitative principles and methods. Multiple coders were used in an effort to minimize the effects of individual biases on the selection of coded text (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Each graduate student was the primary coder for 40 transcripts. Ten transcripts were coded by both students, and the degree of agreement was calculated as a percentage in an effort to assess reliability. The target percentage of agreement was 80% (Zimmerman et al., 2004); 91% agreement was achieved. The coders met to discuss areas of non-agreement and to assign final themes. Coding was completed in three stages.

The initial phase of data analysis required identifying segments of the interviews in which the target problem situation involved peer victimization. In some cases, students were presented with two situations involving peer victimization. Both situations were coded in an effort to maximize the breadth of coping behaviors used by adolescent youth. The number of situations to which each participant responded was recorded in SPSS as a control variable.

The second phase of coding involved identifying distinct segments of the transcripts and organizing them into emergent themes that represented different coping strategies adolescents *would* do in response to peer victimization. Coding was an iterative process that involved thoroughly reading each transcript, “chunking” similar text segments into distinct, coherent categories of coping responses, naming and defining the

theme, and generating hypotheses about the theme that were explored throughout the coding process (Freudenberg & Zimmerman, 1995). For example, all text quotes pertaining to talking it out were coded as the same theme, whereas all text quotes pertaining to problem-solving were coded under another theme. As the themes emerged, they were entered as free nodes into N6 (Richards, 2002). After all transcripts were coded, the coders met to discuss theme definitions, and nodes that demonstrated considerable overlap in text segments and/or definition were merged (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This process was repeated for text relating to how students believed they *should* respond to peer victimization.

A similar coding process was completed in the third phase of coding in an effort to identify barriers and supports to prosocial coping. Hence, the third phase of coding was only completed on text segments that were classified as prosocial. However, responses to what students thought they would do, as well as what students thought they should do, were included in this portion of the coding. The third phase of coding involved categorizing responses to the open-ended questions, “what would make it easier for you to respond in this way,” and “what would make it harder for you to respond in this way.” A flexible a priori coding structure was selected based on the themes that were identified by Erwin et al. (2005): emotion regulation, problem-solving skill, self-efficacy, values and heuristics, presence of audience, image, and social support. However, coders expected additional subcategories of barriers and supports to emerge, and created new codes as necessary. Definitions and text quote examples were finalized and selected after all text had been coded to ensure that they adequately reflected the phenomenon identified by the participants.

Converting Themes. To examine gender and cluster differences in coping strategies, second-level codes pertaining to what students thought they would do in response to peer victimization were entered as dichotomous variables into SPSS. This transformation was completed following a procedure outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994) that involved creating nominal level data from the emergent themes. Each participant was assigned one of two values for each emergent theme (0= the participant did not mention the theme, 1 = the participant mentioned the theme). Three dummy-coded variables for cluster membership were created, with the well-adjusted group serving as the referent. Logistic regression models were analyzed to determine whether cluster membership or gender uniquely predicted the probability that an individual mentioned each coping response. The number of situations completed, and the number of coping strategies identified by each participant were controlled by entering this variable into the first step of the regression model.

Chapter Five

Results

Qualitative Results

Qualitative analyses resulted in 28 emergent themes, 15 themes that were indicative of how youth would respond to hypothetical situations involving peer victimization, and 13 themes that described what they thought was the right thing to do (see tables 4 and 5). Of the 15 emergent themes representing coping behaviors respondents indicated they would do, 11 were identified by at least five participants, and seven were mentioned by at least 10 participants. Of the 13 themes that emerged in response to what participants perceived to be the “right thing to do” in response to hypothetical victimization, six were mentioned by at least five participants, and five were mentioned by at least 10 participants. This indicates that many of the emergent themes were relatively well represented in the data, though 16 of the 28 themes were identified by less than 10 people. This section will describe each coping response pertaining to how students indicated they would respond to victimization, including the motives and reasoning behind each response, and provide examples from the text to demonstrate the salience of each coping response to victimization. For all text quotes, “S” identifies statements made by the student, and “I” refers to words spoken by the interviewer.

Table 2.

Themes Related to How Students Would Respond to Peer Victimization

Theme	# of Respondents	% of Respondents
1. Talk it out	38	48%
2. Fight	21	26%
3. Relational and/or verbal aggression	17	21%
4. Ignore it/Do nothing	16	20%
5. End interpersonal relationship	14	18%
6. Problem-solving	11	14%
7. Social support from school staff	10	13%
8. Walk away	9	11%
9. Control emotions	8	10%
10. Ask them to stop	5	6%
11. Prevent fighting	5	6%
12. Joke/Laugh it off	3	4%
13. Peer mediation	3	4%
14. Parental support	3	4%
15. Tell people the rumor is not true	3	4%

How Students Would Respond to Peer Victimization

Talk it out. Talking the problem out was the most frequently identified response to the question “what would you likely do in this situation,” identified by 49% of the participants. This theme was represented across all social clusters, and reported at similar frequencies for boys and girls. This theme involved the participant confronting the other

person involved in the situation in a positive way, and talking through the conflict. In many instances, youth indicated the importance of both identifying their feelings and reactions to their assailants, and letting the assailant explain himself or herself. Motives for talking out the problem included seeking the truth about the situation (e.g., who was involved, why did it happen), apologizing to the person (e.g., in the situation that involved being falsely blamed for spreading a rumor), maintaining a friendship with the person, preventing aggression, and preventing negative consequences such as getting into trouble or getting suspended.

Prosocial intent is clearly demonstrated by a girl in the well-adjusted cluster who indicated she would talk through a situation in which her friend was fake with her, sometimes acting like a friend and sometimes saying mean things about her. In response to the question, "What do you think you would likely do in this situation," she states:

S: I wouldn't fight or nothing like that. I'll just talk it out with her beforehand and see what's really going on.

I: Okay so talk it out with the person and find out why they're acting that way?

S: It's not nothing to fight about.

I: Okay. Um...could you tell me more about that? Is there anything else you might do?

S: I wouldn't go around and tell some more rumors about that person, that would just make the situation worse. So I'd try to work it out.

I: Okay why would you do this?

S: Because it's very stupid it's nothing, if the stuff wasn't true then why would you fight over it?

Another girl, included in the aggressive-victim social cluster, also identified talking out the problem as how she would cope to a similar situation that involved her friend telling others a secret she had told her friend in private. This participant is motivated to talk out the problem in the hopes of staying out of trouble:

S: I would be upset but I wouldn't take it out on I wouldn't take it out on the person who they told I'd take it out on the person cause they promised that they wouldn't say a thing and they went behind my back and told.

I: So how would you take it out on them? What would you do?

S: I wouldn't get I wouldn't yell at them or nothing but I would just be like why did you do that you promised me you wouldn't tell anybody I can't believe you and you're not a good friend, stuff like that.

I: Okay so you pretty much approach them and you know talk to them about it tell them how you feel and stuff.

S: Yeah.

I: Okay why would you do this?

S: Because if, if umm, if I just walk up to 'em and be like why you tell 'em and start yellin at 'em then they'll that'll be startin' a fight and then I would get suspended over something stupid.

A youth in the passive cluster reasons about whether he should fight the person who spread private information about him, or talk it out with the person. The importance of maintaining his friendship with the person was the main impetus behind his decision to talk it out with the person. He states that he would probably talk through the conflict with

a friend “Cause friendship doesn’t really need to, you know, be ruined over something, you know, little, small.”

Many students indicated that they would talk over the situation with the others involved in order to get more information about the conflict. In some instances, getting more information was important for seeking comfort and closure about the situation, whereas in others more information was sought in order to know who to fight, or whether the friendship with the person should be maintained. The latter motive is demonstrated by a boy in the well-adjusted cluster who is thinking about what he would do if his friend was acting fake, sometimes being nice to him and sometimes saying mean things about him. This boy indicates the importance of talking to his friend to find out what is going on, and whether it is worth maintaining the friendship:

S: I would go ask this person why they keep talking about me and I would confront them about it and ask they why they keep doing it. That’s about it, that is all I can do.

I: So you confront your friends. Why would you do that?

S: Because I want to talk about it. See if he is either my friend or not...If they still be my friend, they will apologize.

Finally, another motive mentioned by participants for talking out the situation was to clear their name and maintain their image. This motive is demonstrated by a boy in the rejected cluster who has been asked what he would do if a rumor has been started about him and it keeps getting worse:

I: You would talk to the person who started the rumor. And like, could you tell me more about that, like what would you say to them, and how would you approach them, you know, stuff like that?

S: I wouldn't approach them meanly, I'd just go when they're not with friends and everything, just tell them, what you're saying about me is not true.

I: Ok, alright so you would approach them and in a nice way, and just tell them that the rumor that they started is not true?

S: Yeah.

I: Ok, and why would you do that?

S: To clear my name, that's it.

Fighting. Fighting was the second most frequently identified coping strategy in response to victimization, and was mentioned by 26% of the participants. This theme was represented across all social clusters, and was mentioned by both boys and girls. One of the main motivations behind fighting was anger. Respondents indicated that despite knowing the negative consequences that may follow getting in a fight, they would aggress against their assailant anyway. This desire and readiness to fight is explained by a well-adjusted girl, who is responding to a situation that involves a rumor being spread about her. She states:

I: OK...Another kid at school said something that's disrespectful about your family?

S: I'm going to punch her in her face. (laughter)

I: OK...The first question is what would you be thinking? If somebody...

S: I wouldn't be thinking nothing, I'd just punch her.

I: There's nothing you'd be thinking in your head?

S: Naw. (hard to understand) and then I'd hurt her I would punch her in her eye. And I'm dead serious.

I: umm...So nothings in your head like no thoughts about it?

S: Umm-uh [I think it means NO] I'd be ready to fight.

I: OK...So you'd be thinking that you're ready to fight? And how would you feel if somebody said disrespectful something disrespectful about your family?

S: I'd be mad. I'd be ready to brawl.

I: Yeah you'd be mad? Umm...What would you be worried or concerned about in that situation?

S: Nothing. I'd just be concerned about beating her.

I: Ok...So you'd be concerned that you'd come out winning the fight.

S: No not winning, I'm just saying beating her.

I: So it doesn't matter if you win or not?

S: Um-uh [NO] as long as I hit her.

I: As long as you hit her?

S: That's all that matter.

I: Are you concerned about getting hit?

S: Umm-uh. [NO]

I: Would you be concerned about umm...getting suspended from school or anything like that?

S: Umm-uh. [No]

I: So the consequences of hitting don't matter?

S: Nope.

Another "hot button" issue that prompted many respondents to indicate they would fight was any situation involving disrespect of one's family. A well-adjusted boy exemplifies how interpersonal interactions may escalate to aggression when family

members are disrespected. This youth was presented with a situation involving other students teasing him and calling him names. He indicated that he would “crack back” unless his assailants crossed the line, in which case he would fight them:

I: Would you do anything else?

S: I might fight them.

I: What would get you to the fight part?

S: If it got out of control and real serious.

I: What do you mean by out of control. What is it like when it gets out of control?

S: Talking about people’s momma’s and stuff.

Finally, some youth indicated that they would respond to victimization by fighting in order to maintain their image and reputation, and to prevent themselves from being thought of as a “punk,” someone who won’t fight or stand up for himself or herself. This motive is demonstrated by a boy in the aggressive cluster who has been presented with a situation that involves accidentally crossing the line with a friend, and now the friend wants to fight him. This boy states:

S: I would actually fight him.

I: You would?

S: I mean I wouldn’t fight him, fight him . I, like, if he wants to fight me come on, if he don’t, then leave it at that. Because why would I fight you over um...I am not really the one that wants to fight you. You want to fight me over a joke.

I: So what would you do you would fight if he wanted to fight or...

S: Yeah if he wanted to fight yeah I would fight him.

I: Okay, so can you tell me anything more about that?

S: I mean I ain't going to sit back and say I ain't going to fight you man. I don't feel like fighting you. Then, I mean it ain't going to make you seem like a punk cause I ain't scared of nobody.

Relational and verbal aggression. Seventeen students (21% of the sample) indicated they would cope with a situation involving peer victimization with verbal or relational aggression, including rumor-spreading, yelling, and name-calling. The only motive that emerged from this type of aggression was retaliation: if they did this to me, I need to do this to them. As demonstrated by a girl in the passive cluster, this type of coping is reactive, impulsive, and automated. Responding to a hypothetical situation in which someone is talking about her family, this student explains:

I: Alright, now what do you think you would do in this situation?

S: (Pause). I'd probably start talking about the other person's family too.

I: And why do you think you would do that?

S: It's a reaction. It's a reaction. Cause when you see a lot of people doing something, of course you are going to want to do it.

I: So that would be your first reaction?

S: My first reaction is to talk about him. Because kids sit in class all day and talk about each other, but at the end they are able to walk away and laugh about it later.

I: But it says disrespecting someone's family. They are not just joking. They are saying someone's disrespecting your family.

S: I would probably talk about them.

I: Okay, why would you do that though?

S: Cause, I'm saying, when you see people constantly doing stuff, you pick it up.

I: So you'd talk about it because other kids are talking about it? Is that what you are saying?

S: No, cause they talk about me.

I: So they talk about you, so you talk about them back.

S: Yeah.

Ignore. Sixteen students indicated that they would ignore their assailants and do nothing in response to peer victimization. For many students, the motive behind ignoring their assailant was to make the situation go away without doing the wrong thing. For instance, a girl in the passive cluster indicates that she would ignore a rumor that was being spread about her in the hopes that it would go away. She states:

S: Um, I would probably be mad, but I probably won't show it. I'd just probably ignore it.

I: Ok, so you'd pretend it didn't happen.

S: Yeah.

I: Do you think that you would ever talk to the person who started?

S: No.

I: Ok, so you wouldn't confront them.

S: No.

I: Um, and why do you think you would ignore it versus trying something else?

S: Because I don't want to do the wrong thing.

Another motive that was mentioned by youth who indicated they would ignore the victimization was to maintain their friendship with the assailant. A girl in the rejected group indicated that she would respond differently if a friend versus a classmate said something disrespectful about her family:

I: Well if it is your friend what would you do?

S: Probably ignore it.

I: So if it's a friend of yours and they are saying something disrespectful about your family you would ignore them?

S: Yes.

I: Yes. Okay. Why would you ignore your friend and not your classmate?

Is there any particular reason?

S: Because me and my friend can always get back together and be friends again but I don't know about the classmate.

I: Okay. So um with your friend you ignore it cause you know you could become...

S: Make up again.

This quote demonstrates that the goal of maintaining a friendship is influential for coping decisions, and some youth may be afraid to attempt assertive responses if their friend is the assailant rather than a peer with whom they are less close.

End interpersonal relationship. Fourteen students indicated they would end the interpersonal relationship they had with their assailant. Most students indicated that they would end the relationship because they did not want to surround themselves with negativity. As one boy in the rejected cluster explains:

S: I wouldn't do nothing stupid or nothing like to harm them... I wouldn't do nothing like that. Leave them alone. Stop being friends with them. There's no use in getting in trouble or something. They've done said it.

I: So there's nothing that you really would do. You would just stop being friends with them.

S: Yeah.

I: What um why would you just leave him alone? Why would you choose to do that?

S: Cause they had made a rumor that I can't, that I can't deal with, especially if it was something important...

I: Okay what uh, how would your relationship with that person be Affected? Obviously you wouldn't have a relationship with them at all. Is that what you're saying?

S: Yeah I'm saying that but I wouldn't have no relationship with them at all. I wouldn't speak to them.

Problem-solving. Problem-solving about the situation was mentioned by 11 participants. Students spoke about gathering information, brainstorming alternatives, creating a sequential plan of what to do if the first strategy does not work, and thinking about consequences. Problem-solving is a process that evolves with age, and is a frequent target of violence prevention programs. The primary motive mentioned by students for gathering more information was to determine specific characteristics of the situation (e.g., who was involved in the conflict, why did they do it). This motive is demonstrated by a girl who was classified as well-adjusted who is thinking about what she would do if a rumor was started about her that keeps getting worse and worse:

I: What do you think you would do?

S: Go find out who started the rumor.

I: Why?

S: So I can know like if it's one of my friends or something like that ain't no real friend if you gonna go start a rumor about me then that ain't cool. We ain't cool no more.

She demonstrates that seeking out information is an important first step in problem-solving, as subsequent decisions, actions, thoughts, and feelings may change if additional information is gathered. For this girl, the information that she gathers will impact her decision of whether she should maintain a friendship with her assailant.

The motivation to seek additional information is articulated by another girl in the well-adjusted cluster who states, "...If they started a rumor about you and then if it's getting worser and worser you're gonna automatically want to find out who started all this. Cause that's making you look bad and you're feeling really bad too." Hence, gathering information provides a way for youth to make sure they can think through their actions, as well as alleviate emotional discomfort they may have.

Another motive involved in using problem-solving steps in response to peer victimization is avoiding negative consequences. In this example, a boy in the rejected cluster indicates he would seek out information to prevent getting into trouble:

I: So you would try to figure out, get to the bottom of it, find out who was talking about you.

S: Yeah.

I: Okay, so why would you do that?

S: Cause I don't want nothing be blamed on me and then that person go to

tell the person that and I get in trouble for it.

Seek social support from school staff. Ten students indicated they would seek social support from school staff, such as a teacher or the principal. This coping strategy was identified across all genders and social clusters. Students acknowledged the power differential between teachers and students, and verbalized their belief that teachers could stop victimization by disciplining the assailant. Hence, the main goal of seeking support from a teacher is to have someone with power stop the situation. This is demonstrated by girl in the well-adjusted who states that she would tell an adult at school if she was getting picked on or teased at school with the hopes that her assailant would get into trouble:

I: Okay, why would you go tell an adult?

S: Because they are more likely to do something about it than what I can.

Like I can't send them out of the room or make them apologize but an adult can.

Another motive for youth to seek support from the teacher or other school staff was to keep themselves from getting into a fight, and then potentially getting suspended or in trouble at home. A female, classified as aggressive, explains:

I: Okay. So you don't want any fights to happen and you don't want, you want them to stop talking about you. Alright. Now what do you think you would likely do in this situation?

S: Tell them to leave me alone and go tell the teacher.

I: Okay. So you would tell the teacher and tell them to leave you alone.

S: Un huh.

I: Alright and why would you do this ?

S: Because if I do that it won't start a fight.

Walk Away. Nine students indicated they would walk away if they were in a situation involving peer victimization. Motives behind deciding to walk away from the situation included solving the problem, controlling emotion, avoiding conflict, and staying out of trouble. In addition, some students indicated they would enact an active approach to the problem, and then walk away. A boy in the passive cluster describes how walking away after confronting his assailant is an effective way of dealing with being teased:

I: What do you think you would do?

S: I'd be like, can you leave me alone please? I wasn't doing nothing to you all and then you came over here and started messing with me.

I: So you would like talk to the people?

S: Yes. And then I would like, I would walk off.

I: So you think you would walk away. Anything else? And why would you do that?

S: Because just trying to resolve the issue as soon as possible in a positive way.

I: ...And what would happen after that, after you talk to him and walk away.

What do you think would happen next? Would they keep teasing you, or would they stop?

S: They would stop.

This student would enact an active coping strategy, and then walk away to prevent further teasing or retaliation from his assailant.

Other students indicated they would walk away from the situation in order to avoid conflict, including getting into a fight or listening to others fight. An aggressive boy states:

I: What do you think that you would likely do if that happens? So two of your friends are fighting and they are trying to like, put you in the middle of that. How would you handle that? Or what would you say to them or do?

S: Probably walk away or leave them standing right there.

I: Okay, so you said you wouldn't really try and get involved, kind of walk away, or, and not get involved in the situation. Um, and why do you think that you would try and do that...

S: So I wouldn't listen to them arguing.

Another goal articulated by students who indicated they would walk away from the situation was to avoid getting into trouble (e.g., getting suspended, getting into trouble at home). This student describes:

I: If you had to choose something what do you think you'd likely do?

S: Walk away.

I: You'd probably walk away? Okay that's what you would most likely do?

S: Yeah.

I: Alright, um why would you do that?

S: 'Cause I'm not trying to get in trouble or nothing.

I: Okay alright cause you're worried about getting punished and your parents finding out? Is that...

S: Yeah.

I: ...Okay what would happen next if you walked away?

S: Everybody would start rumors and stuff like I'm a punk 'cause I didn't fight whoever.

Finally, some students indicated that the main goal behind their decision to walk away from the situation was for them to control their anger or other emotional responses to the incident. A boy in the aggressive cluster states that he would walk away due to his anger:

I: Okay. And how would your relationship with that kid be affected that was talking about you, your family?

S: I'd be mad at them. I wouldn't be talking to them and if he come near me I'll tell him git from around me cause you've been talking all this stuff about me and my family, and I'll just try to walk away.

Control emotions. Eight students indicated that they would attempt to control their emotions when dealing with peer victimization. Students spoke of the importance of keeping themselves or others involved in the situation calm in order to keep the problem from escalating. A boy in the passive cluster talks about the importance of keeping calm to prevent himself from being blamed for the situation and getting in trouble. He states:

I: If this situation were happening to you were somewhere is spreading a rumor about a student and you get blamed for it and now you have a big problem with this person who thinks you were talking about them behind their backs. What do you think you would likely do in this situation?
What would you probably do?

S: I'd keep a calm voice. It won't me, probably another student but it was not me.

I: Anything else you would do?

S: I'd stay calm and try to ignore what other people say.

I: Why would you do this? Why would you stay calm and ignore them?

S: Because words sometimes can hurt, but you just got to stay calm, keep a clean mind, and try to keep yourself organized or whatever so you won't get in trouble and get the blame for it. Or they sit around talk or whatever and you be getting you work done.

A student in the well-adjusted group explains that keeping calm is necessary in order to talk the problem out with the others involved. She also indicates that by keeping calm, she will be able to keep herself from retaliating against her assailant. She explains that if she was in a situation where rumors were being spread about her, she would:

S: Um...I would just kinda be kinda calm about it; you know, go up to them and ask them why would they start a rumor about me or whatever.

I: Listen to what they have to say.

S: Yeah. I wouldn't make a big huge deal out of it. But that's pretty much what I would do.

I: But you would want them to know that you knew about it.

S: Yeah, I would want them to know that I knew about it and I want them to know to tell me why me. And especially if I don't even know the person, I want to know how they know me and why would they spread a rumor like this, they don't like me or something. And I'd ask them why didn't you come tell me or confront me or something.

I: Would you be angry when you were talking to them or kind of yelling at them or would you really want this to be more of like a conversation?

S: I'd be angry but I wouldn't yell at them or anything, just be kind of calm and kinda keep my anger inside me, be calm about it.

I: Okay so you wouldn't be going to them to try to start something.

S: No.

I: Okay. Um...why do you think that you would go up to them and maybe talk to them and ask them questions versus doing something else like maybe another kid would start a rumor back about that person or start a fight with them. Like why do you think that what you would do would be to calmly talk about it with them?

S: Um, well if I went and started another rumor I'd be just as worse as that person who started that rumor about me, I'd be no better off.

Ask assailant to stop. Four students indicated that they would ask their assailant to stop. Goals and motivations involved with this coping response were not articulated in the interviews, though students believed this was an effective way to make their assailant stop and to control their emotional response to the incident. The prosocial intent behind asking the other people involved to stop is articulated by a boy in the passive cluster who states:

I: OK. Alright. Now if this situation was happening to you, what do you think you would do?

S: I'd be like, can you leave me alone please? I wasn't doing nothing to you all and then you came over here and started messing with me.

I: So you would like talk to the people?

S: Yes. And then I would like, I would walk off.

I: So you think you would walk away. Anything else? And why would you do

that?

S: Because just trying to resolve the issue as soon as possible in a positive way.

Prevent fighting. Five students indicated that they would respond to an instance of peer victimization by preventing a fight. This coping response was particularly salient for situations involving a friend, such as being caught in the middle of two friends fighting and crossing the line with a friend. The main motivation behind preventing a fight was to maintain a relationship with the person involved. A boy in the passive cluster articulates:

I: What do you think you would likely do in this situation if you and your friend were joking and you accidentally took it over, you didn't realize that you crossed the line and your friend got mad and wanted to fight you. What do you think you would do?

S: Try to stop us from fighting.

I: How would you go about that, stopping from fighting?

S: Try to ignore what he is saying and how he wants to fight me. Try to calm him down.

I: So you would try to calm him down and find out why he wants to fight you?

S: Yeah.

I: Why would you do this? Why would you try to calm him down?

S: So we can keep our relationship.

Laugh it off. Three students, all of whom were categorized as well-adjusted, indicated they would respond to victimization by laughing it off or making a joke out of it. All students indicated that their motive for doing this would be to lighten the situation

and prevent getting into trouble. This boy has been presented with a problem involving another student teasing him and calling him names. He states:

I: OK Tell me more about what you would likely do in that situation?

S: Try to play it off.

I: You would try to play it off?

S: Yes. I wouldn't do nothing. I would try to ignore them.

I: You would try to ignore them and play it off. Like they said something and you would act like it wasn't bothering you?

S: Yes I would say something back to them...I would get upset but I wouldn't fight or nothing...because if I said something to him then he would be ready to fight. And then we would get in trouble for something stupid.

Peer mediation. Three students identified seeking peer mediation as a coping strategy they would use when coping with peer victimization. These students indicated that their motive for seeking out peer mediation was that peer mediation would ensure that the other person would have to hear them out. For instance, a girl in the rejected cluster explains that she is not sure if she could get the other person involved to listen to her outside of peer mediation:

I: Ok, and what do you think you'd likely do if that happened to you, if you crossed the line by accident and a friend want to fight you for real?

S: The same thing, I'd go to peer mediation.

I: Ok, you'd go tell a teacher that you needed to go to peer mediation yourself.

S: Mmmhmm.

I: Ok, and why would you do that?

S: So we can just settle it. So I could tell her what, um, what I mean, cause they give you a chance to talk.

I: And why couldn't you do that by yourselves?

S: Cause I don't think she would stay or nothing.

Another important goal for going to peer mediation was to salvage the friendship or relationship with the other person involved. A girl assigned to the well-adjusted cluster explains:

S: The person...me and the person would never get to fighting. If it came Out, then we would go to peer mediation and how I want it to end is that me and the person could try to be friends. But we don't have to be best friends, but you know when I say hi to the person they don't get an attitude, be like who she think she talking too? I won't like her no way.

Seek parental support. Three students indicated they would likely seek support from their parents if they were victimized by their peers. Similar to the power differential that students recognized when they spoke of seeking support from their teacher or other school staff, students perceived their parents to have greater power in alleviating the problem than themselves. This perceived power differential is demonstrated by a girl in the passive cluster who is thinking about what she would do if peers were teasing and picking on her. She states, "I'd go tell the teacher or when I get home I'll tell my daddy. Because if I tell my daddy, he'll come up here and fix the problem."

Whereas the preceding passage describes a child wanting her father to take care of the problem for her, another motive for seeking parental support is to get advice. This is exemplified by a girl in the rejected group who states, "I'd ask my momma what I should do." This difference distinguishes between seeking support that will enable the child to

handle the problem him or herself (e.g., the latter example), and seeking support that will result in another person resolving the problem (e.g., the former example).

Tell people the rumors are not true. Three students, all of whom were asked what they would do if a rumor was being spread about them, indicated they would tell their friends and peers that the rumors were not true. The main motivation behind this coping response was to clear their name and make the rumors stop. This is demonstrated by a boy in the well-adjusted cluster who has been presented with the hypothetical situation that he has been blamed for spreading a rumor about someone else, and now that person wants to fight him. He explains:

S: I 'd probably try to do whatever I can to convince this person that I wasn't the one spreading the rumor.

I: Do things like what?

S: Go around and asking everybody and telling him well so-and-so said that, so-and-so spread the rumor, not me.

I: Why would you want to do that?

S: To help convince that I wasn't the one spreading the rumor.

How Students Should Cope with Peer Victimization

Qualitative analysis resulted in 13 themes that described how students thought they *should* cope with peer victimization. Similar to how students said they *would* cope, talking out the problem was the most frequently used code. With the exception of one student, all participants identified non-aggressive techniques as the way that they should cope with peer victimization. Table 3 summarizes each theme, as well as the number and percentage of respondents who mentioned each theme. The themes that emerged as

coping responses students *would* do versus what they *should* do were similar, with 12 themes represented on both Tables 2 and 3. Minimizing the problem was the one coping strategy that students indicated they *should* try, but it did not emerge as a strategy that students would use.

Table 3

Themes Related to How Students Think They Should Respond to Peer Victimization

Theme	# of Respondents	% of Respondents
1. Talk It Out	36	45%
2. Social support from school staff	14	18%
3. Ignore it	14	18%
4. Do nothing/Leave it alone	13	16%
5. Walk away	11	14%
6. Minimizing	5	6%
7. Peer mediation	4	5%
8. Parental support	4	5%
9. Tell people the rumor is not true	3	4%
10. Tell person to stop	3	4%
11. End interpersonal relationship	2	3%
12. Problem-solving	2	3%
13. Social aggression	1	1%

Prosocial, Aggressive, and Avoidant Coping

All text quotes that were identified as a way that students would cope with victimization were coded as prosocial, aggressive, avoidant, or unable to be determined. Decisions regarding the classification of coping behaviors was made for each individual text quote, rather than classifying an entire theme as prosocial, aggressive, or avoidant. This was done due to the possibility that two students who engaged in the same coping behavior (e.g., problem-solving) had qualitatively different motives (e.g., gather more information so I can generate alternative coping strategies versus gather more information so I know who I need to fight). Text segments were coded as prosocial if they met the following criteria: (a) indicated at least some level of social, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and moral competence (Catalano et al., 2002), (b) were not physically, verbally, or relationally aggressive, (c) were representative of the types of coping skills promoted by youth violence prevention programs, (d) had the potential to solve the problem effectively or efficiently (Farrell et al., 2005c), and (e) expressed prosocial motives (e.g., maintain a friendship, keep self and others from harm's way). Prosocial coping is exemplified by the following text quote:

S: I would talk to him, talk him out of it.

I: Okay, so you would just try to talk to him, try to stop him [from wanting to fight you]. Okay. Can you tell me anything more about that?

S: Tell him we was just playing.

I: So why would you just want to talk about it, and why would you tell him you were just playing?

S: 'Cause I want his friendship back, and I don't want to get in a fight.

The aggressive code was used if the response involved the initiation of physical, verbal, or relational aggression. Aggressive responses included pre-meditated , proactive acts of aggression (e.g., seeking more information to find out who to fight) and reactive acts of aggression (e.g., being so mad that fighting was impulsive). Aggressive coping is exemplified by a boy who indicates he will fight someone who is disrespecting his family:

I: In the situation where another kid at school says something disrespectful about your family, what do you think you would likely do in this situation?

S: Probably fight or something...because like once somebody starts talking about your momma you just get stained, then you don't know what else to do.

Coping responses were considered avoidant if the underlying motive was to avoid attenuating or eliminating the problem. Avoidant coping responses were indicative of youth who preferred to do nothing rather than attempt to confront the person involved or to attempt to fix the problem. Although some students who identified avoidant coping responses articulated prosocial motives (e.g., preventing a fight), they were unable to articulate alternatives other than avoiding the problem. For example:

S: I would probably get mad, but I probably won't show it. I'd just probably ignore it.

I: So, you'd pretend it didn't happen?

S: Yeah.

I: Do you think you would ever talk to the person who started it?

S: No.

I: Okay, so you wouldn't confront them?

S: No...because I don't want to do the wrong thing.

Fifty-five students (69%) identified at least one prosocial coping response. Thirty-five students (44%) identified at least one aggressive coping response, and 18 students (22%) identified at least one avoidant response. Codes were mutually exclusive, such that a coping response could not be coded as prosocial and aggressive, prosocial and avoidant, etc. Four coping responses were identified that could not be classified as prosocial, aggressive, or avoidant due to protocol infidelity (e.g., interviewer did not question the respondent about motives), or the inability to hear the participant's response (e.g., the respondent mumbled).

Factors Influencing Prosocial Coping

Qualitative analysis identified 20 emergent themes that represented barriers and supports to prosocial coping. Of the 20 themes, 10 were barriers, and 10 were supports. This section will describe each theme, as well as provide representative text quotes. Tables 4 and 5 summarize the emergent barriers and supports, as well as the number and percentage of respondents who identified them.

Table 4

Supports of Prosocial Coping Strategies

<i>Supports</i>	# of Respondents	% of Respondents
1. Problem-solving skill	21	26%
2. Closeness of relationship with assailant	20	25%
3. Emotion regulation skill	19	24%
4. Support from adults	19	24%
5. Attributes of others involved	18	23%
6. Peer support	16	20%
7. Prosocial values	15	19%
8. Self-efficacy	14	18%
9. Absence of audience	9	11%
10. Emotional arousal	6	8%

Table 5

Barriers to Prosocial Coping Strategies

<i>Barriers</i>	<i># of Respondents</i>	<i>% of Respondents</i>
1. Attributes of others involved	22	28%
2. Escalation/Continuance of problem	20	25%
3. Emotional arousal	17	21%
4. Closeness of relationship with assailant	13	16%
5. Presence of bystanders	12	15%
6. Image	11	14%
7. Fear of retaliation/violence	10	13%
8. Lack of problem-solving skill	6	8%
9. Lack of peer support	5	6%
10. Aggressive values	2	3%

Level of problem-solving skill. The degree to which youth had developed problem-solving skills was a factor that acted as both a barrier and support to prosocial coping. Students demonstrated how mastery of problem-solving skills supported talking out problems, walking away from victimization, and laughing or joking about the victimization through the interviews. The most common problem-solving skill mentioned as a support for prosocial coping was thinking through consequences, followed by generating alternative coping strategies. A boy in the well-adjusted cluster indicated he would walk away from an incident involving students picking on him calling and him names. He explained:

I: Would anything make it easier to ignore it and walk away?

S: Look at an example. Like if the same thing happened to the other dude. If something had already happened to that dude you could look on that and see the consequences. That happened to the other dude in the same situation...If you hit him, you get in trouble for it. If you walk away, they might leave you alone.

A boy in the aggressive cluster explained how generating alternative solutions to his problem, in this case someone disrespecting his family, will support him in seeking help from a teacher:

I: What would make it easier for you to do that? What would help you to go to the teacher and tell them?

S: Uh, I would say, I would like, first I'd talk to them and then if that don't work then me and him would walk up to the office and explain it to the Principal and tell them why that like he was talking about my family and me.

This student recognizes the need to have more than one solution, and has a plan

for how he will cope if his first strategy is ineffective.

Problem-solving can also act as a barrier to students following through with prosocial coping strategies. The ability to think through consequences may influence this well-adjusted girl from talking it out with a friend who is acting fake with her, sometimes acting like a friend and other times talking behind her back. The ability to think through consequences may lead to fear or being overly-cautious to try new strategies:

I: What would make it hard for you to go and ask the person why they are saying mean things about you? Like, is there anything that would stop you from going and asking him?

S: I wouldn't want to get suspended or ruin my grades if I get suspended, or I miss class, or get put out of school.

Although the interviewer did not follow up with this student's reasoning, it is possible that this student is afraid that approaching her friend to talk about the problem may result in a fight, which could then lead to her getting suspended from school. This suggests that using prosocial coping strategies may take time and practice; their use may depend on actual and vicarious successful experiences.

Closeness of the relationship with the assailant. Students indicated that the quality of their existing relationship with the assailant would either facilitate or deter their use of a prosocial coping strategy. Some students explained that feeling close to a person would facilitate talking it out, seeking peer mediation, walking away from the situation, and asking the person to stop. Conversely, lack of closeness with the assailant may reduce the likelihood that an adolescent will control their anger, use problem-solving skills, walk away, or ask the person to stop. In general, students stated that they would be more likely

to use a prosocial coping strategy with a friend, or someone with whom they had a history with, and less likely with someone who they did not like, or did not know well. This quote from a member of the aggressive cluster demonstrates how her closeness with the person who was saying mean things about her family would affect her coping choice:

I: Yes. Okay. Why would you ignore your friend and not your classmate?

Is there any particular reason?

S: Because me and my friend can always get back together and be friends again but I don't know about the classmate.

I: Okay. So um with your friend you ignore it cause you know you could become...

S: Make up again.

I: Make up. Okay. But with a classmate you'll say something back again. Okay. Why would you do this, why would you do this um why would you say something back to the classmate?

S: Because um I might not be as close to them as I am to my friend.

I: Okay and with your friend you would ignore it, why.

S: Because we could make up.

I: Okay could you tell me a little bit more about this. So if a classmate said you know something disrespectful about your mother, your father, or maybe about a sister or brother, anything about any family member of yours, you would say something back to them. Why would you say something back to them, I mean you aren't as close to them as you are to a friend, but what would make you say something back to them?

S: First impulse.

I: First impulse. Okay. The first thing you would think of doing is just say something back. Okay. And with your friend, you would ignore it, why. Even if it was something that was you know...

S: Cause maybe they could be playing or but in a very serious way or um...

Emotion regulation. Emotion regulation emerged as a barrier and support to prosocial coping. Emotion regulation refers to one's ability to control emotional reactivity during a stressful or emotionally arousing situation. Students explained how anger management skills and distraction techniques could facilitate more active coping techniques, such as talking their problem out with the other involved, control their emotion, walk away from the situation, or ask the person to stop. However, other students indicated that these same emotion regulation thoughts and behaviors would keep them from doing anything proactive about their situation. For example, a girl included in the well-adjusted group girl explained how calming herself down may inhibit her from trying to talk the situation out with a friend who went and told secrets behind her back:

I: Is there anything that would stop you from asking her why she did that?

S: Probably my thoughts would be like don't go, just let it go, don't worry about it.

Level of social support from adults. Students identified the importance of having support from adults, whether from parents or teachers, for the promotion of prosocial coping, including talking it out, requesting peer mediation, controlling emotion, walking away, ending the interpersonal relationship, and asking their assailant to stop. Parents and

teachers offer students advice on how to handle peer problems, as well as help them calm down and think through their options. A boy in the well-adjusted cluster indicated that getting advice from his mother would help him talk to a friend about being fake with him.

He explained:

I: So alright so you said that your response would be to go up to this kid, okay, and find out why he said what he said or why he's acting so fake. What would help you do that, or make it easier for you to do that?

S: If I asked him why he was doing it?

I: Mmmhmm.

S: Or probably talk to my mother first and see what she say and I'll probably go up to him and ask.

I: So if you talked to your mom that would make it easier?

S: Yeah.

Similarly, a girl in the aggressive cluster explained how talking to a teacher or another adult would help her to calm down and talk to a friend who told a secret she had promised not to tell:

I: Okay so if you go to her or him and you know ask them why did they do that you know they promised not to say what you shared what you told what you told them umm... what would happen next?

S: Eventually I would walk away and then I'd to calm myself down and after I come back if I yelled at them and they think I was serious that I was sorry that I come back to them and tell them I was sorry for yellin at them but I meant what I said and that wasn't really nice.

I: Okay what would help you or make it easy for you to do that to approach them and talk to them?

S: What like [hard to understand] at the end I would sit down and talk to them.

I: Okay what would make it easy for you what would help you to do that?

S: Somebody if I talked to an adult about it and then they told me what to do like just sit em down and talk to em tell em how you feel.

Attributes of others. Students indicated that the attributes of others would influence the way they would handle a situation involving peer victimization. Hence, characteristics of the other person involved in the conflict, or characteristics of someone from whom they would like support (e.g., teacher) would impact the likelihood that they would use a prosocial coping technique. Attributes included the perceived mood of the other person (e.g., are they in a good mood?), physical attributes (e.g., are they bigger than me?), personality attributes (e.g., are they generally nice?), and level of cooperation (e.g., are they going to listen to me?). In general, students were reluctant to try to work out a problem prosocially with someone who was in a bad mood, was bigger than them, was a known bully, wasn't nice, or wouldn't listen to them. Meeting resistance from the other person involved represents another problem for the student, over which they have little direct control. This girl in the well-adjusted group indicated that a barrier for her trying to get her friends to calmly talk through a problem they are putting her in the middle of is their unwillingness to calm down:

I: What do you think would make it harder or stop you from calming them down?

S: Maybe they don't want to calm down.

Meeting resistance from the other person may contribute to perceptions that prosocial coping techniques are ineffective, or it may lower perceptions of self-efficacy. These issues may be addressed through social problem-solving strategies, though at some point students must be willing to know and accept when they are unable to impact the behavior of a peer.

Availability of peer support. Students also identified having social support from peers as an important support for using problem-solving skills, walking away, ending the interpersonal relationship, and telling others that the rumor is not true. Students viewed peers as good sources of advice, as well as individuals who could come with them to help enact the prosocial response, or take care of the problem for them. For instance, a well-adjusted boy explained that it would be easier for him to work through a problem with a friend who is mad at him for crossing the line would be to have a peer apologize for him:

I: Um, is there any other thing that would make it easier to talk to him, like, you know, things about yourself, themselves, you know, place where it may have taken place?

S: The easiest way, if the person is mad at me, the easiest way for me to talk to them is have somebody else send them messages that I sent to the person.

Values. Students indicated that their personal values, which include their own sense of right and wrong, as well as values they have internalized from their parents, would influence their coping choice. The majority of students who spoke about values identified them as a support for prosocial coping, including talking it out, controlling

their emotions, walking away, and ending the interpersonal relationship. As a well-adjusted girl explained:

I: Okay. Um...why do you think that you would go up to them and maybe talk to them and ask them questions versus doing something else? Like maybe another kid would start a rumor back about that person or start a fight with them. Like why do you think that what you would do would be to calmly talk about it with them?

S: Um, well if I went and started another rumor I'd be just as worse as that person who started that rumor about me, I'd be no better off.

This student's self-belief that retaliation is wrong supported her in choosing a more prosocial alternative of calmly talking to the student who is spreading rumors about her.

One boy clarified how the values that he had internalized from his mother would inhibit him from helping his two friends who are putting him in the middle of their fight.

He stated:

I: What would make you not go and talk to them? What would make you stay out of it?

S: My momma.

I: How come?

S: Cause she'd tell me it's just their fight, it's not between you.

His belief that he should stay out of other people's business may keep him from trying to help his friends work out their problem.

Self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to one's confidence and perceived ability to perform a certain task, in this case to perform a prosocial coping response. In this study, students emphasized the importance of having confidence in oneself, having a plan, and feeling confident in one's ability to execute a plan. The primary way in which youth expressed their feelings of self-efficacy was by responding that the coping response would "just be easy for me to do." A girl in the passive cluster exemplified the way in which her perceived self-efficacy will support her in talking through a problem she is having with a friend who promised to keep her secret, but told other people:

I: So you said what you would do is talk to her about why she did what she did.

What would be hard for you to confront her?

S: Really nothing, I would just do it. It's not hard for me to just go up to anybody and just talk to someone and confront them, so it really isn't hard for me to just go and tell her.

Absence or presence of bystanders. A related interpersonal factor that emerged as a barrier to prosocial coping was the presence of bystanders. Students indicated that if others witnessed the victimization, they would have a hard time enacting a prosocial coping technique due to the crowd "boosting up" the situation in hopes of witnessing a fight. Conversely, having the opportunity to be alone with the person emerged as a support for prosocial coping, particularly for talking out the problem. This is exemplified by a well-adjusted girl, who described how others can interfere with trying to work a problem out with a person who is teasing and picking on you:

I: What would make it harder or difficult for you to be able to talk to this person?

S: People standing around me like people standing there saying like “Oh my God, it’s the one who talked about her why is she talking to her.” I’d be hearing all these voices behind me talking about me and it would sidetrack me completely.

Another student clarified how being alone with the person he had been falsely accused of spreading rumors about would facilitate talking about the problem; without a crowd, there is less chance that the problem will escalate:

I: Okay. What would help you or make it easy for you to tell you know this student that you know you weren’t the one who spread to spread the rumors?

S: Sit ‘em down away to where there ain’t nobody around. Just talking, just telling ‘em I ain’t do it, I don’t know what happened or anything I just didn’t do it.

I: So you were saying what would make it easy for you is if no other students were around.

Emotional arousal. Emotional arousal was another factor that emerged as both a barrier and support to prosocial coping. In particular, students indicated that emotional arousal would make it difficult for them to talk out the problem, or walk away from the problem. For other students, feeling emotionally aroused would help them talk out the problem, end an interpersonal relationship, or ask their assailant to stop. It is not difficult to imagine how emotionally-charged incidences may inhibit the use of prosocial coping techniques, which depend in part on the individual’s ability to refrain from acting impulsively. Participants identified a number of emotional experiences they would have

in response to peer victimization, with madness and anger being the most frequently mentioned feeling. Additional feelings that students identified included fear, embarrassment, sadness, betrayal, and hurt. Many students indicated that the intensity of their anger or madness may inhibit their ability to use a prosocial coping response, even when it is a response they think they should make. This is explained by a girl in the aggressive cluster, who indicates that her anger may impede the likelihood that she will talk out her problem with a friend:

I: Okay. Um, how about, is there anything that would make it difficult for you to apologize and talk to her? Is there anything about maybe what was said, or what she was saying about you, anything like that?

S: Most likely, if I say something over the line to her it's because she's done something that's over the line to me. So, the only thing that would probably make it hard is our angriness at each other right now.

Emotional arousal may also act as a facilitator of prosocial coping, in particular seeking help from an adult. As will be discussed later, some students are reluctant to get help from an adult for fear of retaliation by their peers (e.g., being called a tattletale), or because they do not wish to get themselves or their friend in trouble. Others indicated that they would be scared in the event of a situation involving victimization, causing them to favor an avoidant coping strategy over a prosocial technique. However, some situations may scare or anger students so much that this initial resistance of telling an adult is overcome. This is explained by a girl in the aggressive cluster who indicated she would “just get really mad and go tell [the teacher]” if someone was teasing her and calling her names.

Fear of retaliation. Many students indicated that their fear of either relational or physical retaliation would prevent them from enacting a prosocial coping response, which is reflective of the perceived aggressive peer norms cited by these participants. Fear of retaliation was mentioned as a barrier to seeking support from school staff, talking it out with the assailant, requesting peer mediation, controlling emotions, enacting problem-solving strategies, walking away, and ending the relationship. A well-adjusted girl explained that she would be reluctant to talk it out with a person about whom she has been blamed for spreading a rumor. She stated:

I: Some kids might not do that, you know, what makes it easier for you?

S: I try to talk to them but I know they aren't probably going to try to talk they'll try to fight, fight their way out and then there going to be more problems, so that's why I don't wanna do it.

Image. Students emphasized the importance of their public image, and indicated that the need to maintain this image may deter them from enacting a prosocial coping response as a way to deal with victimization. Protecting one's image was identified as a barrier to seeking support from school staff, talking it out, seeking peer mediation, and walking away. Throughout the interviews, a vast majority of students indicated that their peer norms favored aggression. For instance, students almost always stated that "most kids" in their school would respond to victimization aggressively, and they perceived that their peers enjoyed it when students fought. Several students indicated that fear of being called a "punk," or someone who cannot or will not stand up for themselves, would keep them from walking away from a situation, or trying other prosocial techniques. A boy in the aggressive cluster explained why it would be hard for him to walk away from a friend

who was being fake, sometimes being nice to him and sometimes saying mean things about him:

I: So you are going to try to walk away.

S: I don't usually do that.

I: Why not?

S: I ain't like that...I would look like a slouch if I walk away.

Escalation or continuation of problem. Students indicated that if the problem continued, or escalated, they would have a difficult time coping prosocially. The problem could escalate for a variety of reasons, including others boosting it up, failure of previous attempts at conflict resolution, or the other person not cooperating with prosocial attempts (e.g., other person is ready to fight). A well-adjusted boy indicated he would have a hard time walking away from someone who is teasing him if it is something that he had been dealing with for a while. He explained:

S: It would be hard if they keep on picking on me like they had been.

I: So if there was like a history of it. If they did it in the past and they keep on doing it that would make it harder?

S: Yes.

Quantitative Results

The purpose of the quantitative analyses was to determine whether there were differences in coping responses related to gender and cluster membership in coping responses. Because the likelihood of giving a particular type of response is related to the number of opportunities to respond, the number of situations with which the participant was presented, and the number of coping responses each participant identified were

entered in the first step of each logistic regression model. Gender was entered in the second step to control for gender differences in the relation between cluster membership and coping. Cluster membership was entered in the third step to determine its predictive ability; cluster membership was dummy-coded such that the well-adjusted participants served as the comparison group. The results of the logistic regression models are presented in Tables 6, 7, and 8. Regression summaries are presented separately for each dependent variable. Results are discussed as they relate to each hypothesis.

Table 6

Summary of logistic regression analyses for predicting the use of prosocial coping responses.

Step	Variable	Odds Ratio ¹	χ^2 (overall model)	χ^2 (step)
1			8.47*	8.47*
	Number of situations	1.72		
	Number of responses	1.97*		
2	Gender	3.10*	13.20*	4.74**
3	Cluster		15.51**	2.31
	Rejected	0.71		
	Passive-victim	0.75		
	Aggressive-victim	0.61		

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

¹ Odds ratio represents the value at the step in which the variable was entered.

Table 7

Summary of logistic regression analyses for predicting the use of aggressive coping

Step	Variable	Odds Ratio ¹	χ^2 (overall model)	χ^2 (step)
1			3.84**	3.84**
	Number of situations	0.89		
	Number of responses	1.50		
2	Gender	1.28	4.10	2.68
3	Cluster		7.10	3.00
	Rejected	0.87		
	Passive-victim	1.31		
	Aggressive-victim	1.48		

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

¹ Odds ratio represents the value at the step in which the variable was entered.

Table 8

Summary of the logistic regression analyses for predicting the use of avoidant coping

Step	Variable	Odds Ratio ¹	χ^2 (overall model)	χ^2 (step)
1			8.67**	8.67**
	Number of situations	2.76		
	Number of responses	1.59**		
2	Gender	1.13	8.72*	0.04
3	Cluster		11.80	3.07
	Rejected	1.09		
	Passive-victim	0.73		
	Aggressive-victim	0.55		

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

¹ Odds ratio represents the value at the step in which the variable was entered.

Results of the logistic regression models indicated that the likelihood that a prosocial or avoidant coping response was elicited was significantly impacted by the number of coping responses generated by the students. Students increased the likelihood that they identify a prosocial coping strategy two fold for every additional response they generated and increased their odds of generating an avoidant coping strategy by 1.59 times for each additional coping strategy they identified.

Hypothesis 1: Girls will be more likely than boys to identify prosocial coping responses. Results of the logistic regression model confirmed the hypothesis that girls were more likely than boys to identify prosocial coping responses, $\chi^2(1) = 4.74, p < .03$.

The odds ratio indicated that there was a three fold greater odds of generating a prosocial coping strategy for boys than for girls.

Hypothesis 2: Boys will be more likely than girls to identify aggressive coping responses. Results of the logistic regression model did not support the hypothesis that boys would be more likely than girls to generate at least one aggressive coping technique.

Hypothesis 3: Well-adjusted students will be more likely to identify prosocial coping strategies than rejected students, passive-victims, and aggressive-victims. The results of the logistic regression model did not support the hypothesis that students in the well-adjusted cluster would be more likely to identify at least one prosocial coping technique in comparison to students in other social clusters.

Hypothesis 4: Rejected students and passive-victims will be more likely than other social groups to identify avoidant coping strategies. Logistic regression analyses did not support the hypothesis that students in the rejected and passive-victim social clusters would be more likely than students in the well-adjusted and aggressive clusters to identify at least one avoidant coping strategy.

Hypothesis 5: Aggressive--victims will be more likely to identify aggressive coping strategies than members of the other social clusters. The results of the logistic regression analyses did not support the hypothesis that students in the aggressive social cluster would be more likely than members of the well-adjusted, rejected, and passive-victim clusters to identify at least one aggressive coping technique.

Exploratory Analyses. A series of exploratory analyses was conducted to determine whether levels of self-reported aggression, relational aggression, overt victimization, relational victimization, and social acceptance predicted the identification

of prosocial, aggressive, or avoidant coping responses. These analyses were completed to ensure that group differences were not being detected as a result of error associated with the cluster solutions. It was hypothesized that: (a) students who rated themselves as higher on overt and relational aggression would be more likely than their less-aggressive peers to identify aggressive coping strategies, (b) students who rated themselves as higher on overt and relational victimization would be more likely to report aggressive and avoidant coping strategies, (c) students who reported themselves as higher on measures of social acceptance would be more likely to identify prosocial coping strategies, and (d) students who rated themselves low on measures of social acceptance would be more likely to identify avoidant coping strategies. Tables 9, 10, and 11 provide a summary of the findings for each exploratory hypothesis. In Tables 9 and 10, the results of multiple logistic regression analyses are summarized. In both tables, steps 1 and 2 are identical, and step 3 differs based on each individual independent variable.

Table 9

Summary of Three Logistic Regression Analyses for Predicting the Use of an Aggressive Coping Response

Step	Variable	Odds Ratio	χ^2 (overall model)	χ^2 (step)
1	Number of situations	0.89	3.84	3.84
	Number of responses	1.5		
2	Gender	1.28	4.10	0.27
3a	Overt Aggression	1.56	5.99	1.89
3b	Relational Aggression	1.08	4.14	0.04
3c	Relational Victimization	1.16	4.03	0.20

Table 10

Summary of Two Logistic Regression Analyses for Predicting the Use of an Avoidant Coping Response

Step	Variable	Odds Ratio	X^2 (overall model)	χ^2 (step)
1	Number of situations	2.75	8.67*	8.67*
	Number of responses	1.58*		
2	Gender	1.13	8.72	0.04
3a	Overt Victimization	1.80	11.08*	2.35
3b	Relational Victimization	1.57	10.27*	1.54

* $p < .05$.

Note: 3a, 3b, and 3c represent separate analyses in which different variables were entered at the third step.

Table 11

Summary of Logistic Regression Analyses Predicting the Use of Prosocial Coping Responses

Step	Variable	Odds Ratio	χ^2 (overall model)	χ^2 (step)
1	Number of situations	1.72	8.47**	8.47**
	Number of responses	1.98		
2	Gender	3.10	13.20**	4.74*
3	Social Acceptance	0.98	13.24**	0.04

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

The results of the logistic regression models did not support the exploratory hypotheses. However, results indicated that being a girl predicted greater odds of identifying at least one prosocial coping strategy, $\chi^2(1) = 4.74, p < .05$. The odds ratio indicated that the odds that a girl would identify at least one prosocial coping technique was three fold greater than that of a boy.

Chapter Six

Discussion

This study used qualitative and quantitative methods to determine: (a) how African-American youth cope with peer victimization, (b) whether coping behavior differs by gender and/or social cluster, (c) differences in what students think they should do and what they think they would do in response to victimization, and (d) factors that both positively and negatively influence the use of prosocial coping responses. Although the examination of youth coping behaviors has gained momentum over the past 15 years, few of these studies have focused on coping with victimization, and even fewer have involved African-American students attending urban public schools. However, this population is often referred to as “at-risk,” and are often dealing with multiple internal, interpersonal, and environmental stressors (Farrell et al., 2005a) that may affect their ability to cope effectively with victimization. The results of this study identified a number of coping strategies that students thought they either would use or should use in response to victimization. Coping strategies were classified as prosocial, aggressive, or avoidant based on cognitive, behavioral, and emotional criteria, and factors either inhibiting or facilitating prosocial coping were elicited. The interviews provided a thorough and rich view of the complexity of adolescent coping, as students discussed navigating the internal, social, parental, and institutional demands placed on them.

The participants in this interview-based study identified 15 coping strategies they would use in response to hypothetical situations involving peer victimization, including talking it out, fighting, retaliating verbally or relationally, ignoring it, ending the interpersonal relationship, using problem-solving skills, seeking social support from school staff, walking away, controlling emotions, asking the assailant to stop, preventing a fight, laughing it off, requesting peer mediation, seeking parental support, and telling people the rumor was not true. Some of the coping responses generated by the participants in this study overlap with those that have been reported in the extant literature (Causey & Dubow, 1992; Compas et al., 2001; Fields & Prinz, 1998; Salmivalli et al., 1996). For instance, Causey and Dubow (1992) developed the Self-Report Coping Scale (CRCS) that has been widely used by researchers examining coping behaviors associated with peer victimization. Items on the CRCS related to those in the present study included telling a friend or family member what happened, getting help from a friend, talking to the teacher about it, trying to think about different ways to solve it, deciding on a way to deal with the problem, getting mad and throwing or hitting something, taking it out on others, and cursing out loud.

In contrast, several coping strategies identified in the current study have not been adequately examined in existing peer victimization research. For instance, 20% of participants in this study indicated they would do nothing if they were victimized, and 11% of the sample said they would walk away from the situation. Similar prevalence rates were found for what students thought they should do in response to victimization; 16% of students thought they should do nothing, and 14% thought they should walk

away. Most students who identified these strategies indicated they would do so to prevent the problem from escalating, or to avoid getting into trouble. Further, students often mentioned they would walk away from a problem in conjunction with other strategies (e.g., walk away so that I can calm down and talk to the person later). These findings highlight that some techniques that have typically been classified as avoidant play an adaptive role in prosocial coping, contradicting existing literature that associate avoidant coping as maladaptive (Fields & Prinz, 1998).

Assertive behaviors, such as asking their assailant to stop, telling people the rumors being spread about them are not true, and ending the interpersonal relationship typically have not been represented in the existing literature, which is surprising given that assertion is a powerful strategy for ending victimization. For instance, Olweus (1993) found that both assertive and aggressive behaviors were likely to deter bullies from attacking their victim again. Schwartz and colleagues (1993) found that, in general, youth who are chronically victimized were less assertive than their non-victimized peers. The ability to enact assertive, effective responses without escalating the problem is a skill that requires a degree of social competence. Though differences based on social cluster were not confirmed in the present study, it is plausible that assertion may not be as effective for students with low social status when compared to popular youth. For instance, highly-victimized or rejected youth may have less credibility than their peers; hence telling people the rumor is not true may not be a prudent option for some students. The identification of these coping strategies introduces an interesting question for future

research, namely for whom and under what circumstances is assertion an effective coping tool?

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theory emphasized that the ability to control one's emotional reactions is an essential precursor to effective coping. Ten percent of the participants accentuated the importance of controlling their emotions in response to peer victimization. In addition, several students identified emotion regulation as either a barrier or support to prosocial coping. Youth explained that the ability to calm down was a precursor to other prosocial coping responses, such as talking it out, generating alternatives, and preventing a fight. Conversely, intense negative emotions, particularly anger, and the inability to regulate the negative emotional experience emerged as a barrier to prosocial coping strategies. Causey and Dubow's (1993) scale did not include items directly relating to emotion regulation. Instead, items about cognitive processes that may be necessary for regulating emotions are included, such as "trying to understand why the situation happened", "telling myself that it doesn't matter," and "doing something to take my mind off of the conflict" (Causey & Dubow, 1992). Hence, the affective component of emotion regulation is not well represented on this widely used measure. However, students in this study suggested that "keeping their cool" and "letting it roll off" was a conscious coping effort that was not only a strategy they would use in response to victimization, but would also facilitate their initiation of additional prosocial coping techniques. These findings support previous work conducted by Eisenberg and colleagues which highlights the role of emotion regulation in coping with victimization (Eisenberg et al., 2000; Eisenberg et al., 1996).

Five students indicated that they would cope with victimization by doing whatever was necessary to prevent a fight. This coping response was particularly salient for the situation involving being caught in the middle of two friends who are arguing. The importance of preventing a fight also emerged in an interview-based study conducted by Bergin et al. (2003). Their study examined neighborhood differences in youth perceptions of prosocial behavior. Girls living in inner-city, subsidized housing neighborhoods accentuated almost exclusively the importance of preventing fights and avoiding fights as a central component of prosocial behavior. Preventing and avoiding fights may require flexibility, creativity, and social skill on the part of the youth coping with victimization, depending on the extent to which the other person involved in the situation wants to fight. Unfortunately, little is known about this coping response, as it has not been widely studied.

Finally, a few students indicated that either they would go to peer mediation as a way to cope with victimization, or they thought this was something they should do. The effectiveness of peer mediation is a controversial issue. For instance, some researchers have pointed to the ineffectiveness of peer mediation for reducing school-based violence and have even suggested that funding such programs provides politicians protection from criticism aimed at their inability to control youth violence (Webster, 1993). However, Burrell, Zirbel, and Allen (2003) completed a meta-analytic review of 43 studies examining the effects of peer mediation programs on the management of school conflict, and in general reported favorable results. For instance, peer mediation programs reached an agreement between the two parties 93% of the time, and 88% of the time disputants

felt satisfied with the process and the outcomes. Further, the meta-analysis demonstrated an improvement in school climate after the implementation of a peer mediation program, as measured by students, teachers, and school administration. Reduction of the rates of disciplinary actions such as suspensions and expulsions was also seen as a result of peer mediation programs. The results of the present study, combined with the favorable results reported by Burrell et al. (2003) support the use of peer mediation programs as an effective strategy for coping with peer victimization. However, because only a few students mentioned this strategy, the school may need to promote the program and attempt to achieve student “buy in.” In part, this may be achieved by choosing peer mediators with whom students can identify (Huan & Khoo, 2004).

Additional coping responses have been reported in the literature that did not emerge from the qualitative analysis performed in this study. The CRSC contains seven items that relate to distancing techniques (e.g., “make believe nothing happened,” “do something to take my mind off of it”), and seven items that pertain to internalizing techniques (e.g., “cry about it,” “worry too much about it”). Although five students mentioned distancing techniques as something they should do (e.g., “don’t worry about it”), no one identified it as a strategy they would actually try. Similarly, internalizing techniques did not emerge as something students would do in response to peer victimization, which is inconsistent with previous studies that have identified strategies such as crying or other internalizing behaviors in adolescent samples (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001; Causey & Dubow, 1992). For instance, Casey-Cannon et al. (2001) identified internalizing strategies (e.g., feeling sad, crying) as the most prevalent coping response in

their sample of adolescent girls. Talking it out and fighting were the most frequently-coded themes in the present study for both boys and girls, highlighting an inconsistency in the literature. Ethnic, financial, and environmental differences between the samples may account for some of the variability in the findings; both Casey-Cannon et al. (2001) and Causey and Dubow (1992) conducted their studies with primarily Caucasian, middle class youth. Further, Casey-Cannon and colleagues restricted their sample to females only. It is also possible that the participants in the current study did not want to admit to crying, given the value placed on image and toughness in this sample.

Another inconsistency between the current study and the extant literature concerns seeking social support as a coping response. Vernberg and colleagues (1995) found that students who were victimized by their peers would first seek support from their friends, and then a parent. Very few students indicated they would disclose the victimization to a teacher. This is inconsistent with the findings of the present study, in which students were more likely to seek support from teachers than their parents. Further, no students indicated they would seek help from their friends, although peer support did emerge as a factor that would facilitate other prosocial coping methods. It is unclear why students in this sample did not identify seeking peer support as a coping strategy they would try in response to peer victimization, and is worrisome given the importance of peer support as a protective factor for maladjustment (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996). Some researchers have pointed out that African-American students are at a particularly high risk for feeling alienated from their support networks (e.g., Gottfredson, 2001). Compounded with the social nature of peer victimization (Salmivalli et al., 1996),

African-American youth may be reluctant to seek support from peers whom they may not trust, and may be part of the problem. Alternatively, students may feel compelled to uphold a “tough” image, which is particularly important to young African-American males (Cunningham & Meunier, 2004), and this reputational need may inhibit social support seeking behavior.

Classifying Coping Responses

A unique contribution of the present study was the way in which coping responses were classified. Previous studies that have examined how youth cope with peer victimization have relied heavily on the approach/avoidant or problem-focused/emotion-focused coping theories. However, the reliance on broad classifications to organize our knowledge of youth coping may perpetuate an overly-simplistic and inaccurate view of how adolescents cope (Compas et al., 2001). For example, Compas and colleagues (2001) discuss this weakness by criticizing the dimension of emotion-focused coping. Defined as coping efforts that aim to alleviate emotional distress elicited by stressful events, emotion-focused coping encompasses a wide range of coping behaviors, including rumination, wishful thinking, social withdrawal, relaxation, and cognitive distraction. Although all of these strategies are examples of emotion-focused coping, they may differ in terms of intent and effect. The author of the present study appreciated the need to group conceptually-similar coping responses in an effort to understand these behaviors within a prevention framework (Catalano et al., 2002), but did so in a novel way.

The use of qualitative methods allowed for a more rigorous system of classification for differentiating between prosocial, aggressive, and avoidant coping

techniques. In the present study, themes were coded as prosocial if they involved social, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and moral competence (Catalano et al., 2002), were non-aggressive in nature, were representative of the types of coping skills promoted by youth violence prevention programs, had the potential to solve the problem effectively (Farrell et al., 2005c), and expressed prosocial motives. The latter criterion was established to account for the fact that the same behavior may be elicited for either prosocial or aggressive motives. For example, one participant indicated that he would gather more information in order to facilitate his ability to control his emotions and think through his response. However, another student indicated that she would gather more information so she would know whom to fight. Because the intentions of this girl were clearly aggressive, this text quote was not coded prosocial even though gathering more information is a coping response advocated by violence prevention programs. Hence, the methodology used in the present study permitted the integration of goals into categorizing the emergent coping responses, addressing a limitation noted in the literature (Compas et al., 2001; Tolan et al., 2002; Troop-Gordon & Asher, 2005).

Based on this classification system, girls were more likely than boys to generate at least one prosocial alternative to dealing with victimization than their male peers. This is consistent with studies that have found that girls are more likely than boys to seek social support, and engage in problem-solving processes in response to problems with their peers (Causey & Dubow, 1992; Smith, Shu, & Madsen, 2001). However, girls were just as likely as boys to identify aggressive strategies, which is inconsistent with the literature. Several studies have supported the notion that, in general, boys are more aggressive than

girls, and that they are more likely to use aggressive strategies when dealing with peer problems (For review, see Fields & Prinz, 1998). The fact that girls were just as likely as boys to report using aggression in response to victimization is reflective of the social milieu that students described in the interviews; the majority of students described their schools as environments in which the students favored, and even sought, violence. Other researchers have highlighted the prevalence of violence in inner-city environments (Howard, 1996). It is important to note that girls were not only identifying relational aggression as a means of fighting back, but also spoke of physical violence. Whether the relational and overt aggression demonstrated by the girls in this sample is indicative of a national problem is worthy of future research.

Barriers and Supports to Prosocial Coping

In general, students identified non-aggressive, prosocial behaviors as coping strategies they should use in response to victimization. In fact, only one participant indicated that aggression was an effective response to peer problems. This suggests that, at some level, students are aware of how to solve problems non-aggressively, highlighting the importance of identifying factors that can both promote and inhibit the use of prosocial strategies. A number of barriers and supports to prosocial coping emerged in both internal and interpersonal domains.

Internal barriers to prosocial coping included skills-deficits at the individual level, such as limited emotion regulation abilities, problem-solving skills deficits, and limited perceived self-efficacy. Previous studies have found that victims of peer aggression may have skills deficits that perpetuate their victim role within the larger social context

(Dodge et al., 1985; Hymel, Wagner, & Butler, 1990; Sanders, 2004). For instance, victims are more likely to blame themselves for being victimized (Prinstein et al., 2005), report lower levels of perceived self-efficacy (Egan & Perry, 1998; Hodges, Boiven, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999), exhibit higher levels of internalizing and externalizing problems than non-victims (Boulton & Underwood, 1992; Graham et al., 2003; Hanish & Guerra, 2002; Prinstein, Boegers, & Spirito, 2001), and display less socially adept behavior (Ladd, 1983; Putallaz & Wasserman, 1990) than socially well-adjusted youth. This study found that all students, regardless of their level of victimization, had trouble regulating intense, emotional reactions to victimization, and had deficits in their ability to generate solutions to their problems. In addition, youth identified fear about “doing the wrong thing” as a barrier to prosocial coping. This included fear about getting into trouble, causing the problem to escalate, or losing a friend if they tried to do something about the victimization. Because all students reported these deficits, not just chronically-victimized youth, supports the implementation of universal bully-prevention programs that increase these skills. Olweus (1993) has developed a program in which part of the curriculum involves grouping students together to brainstorm ways in which victims can effectively respond to peer victimization. The findings of this study suggest that such programs may, in part, address some of the factors that inhibit students from responding to victimization prosocially.

Additional internal factors that either facilitate or inhibit the use of prosocial coping strategies that typically have not been emphasized in violence prevention programs also emerged from the study. For instance, fifteen students identified prosocial

values, such as valuing friendship, and valuing non-aggression, as supports for prosocial coping. Two students identified aggressive values (e.g., they deserve what they get) as barriers to prosocial coping. Erwin and colleagues (2005) demonstrated the importance of prosocial heuristics for facilitating prosocial coping. In fact, prosocial heuristics was one of the most frequently identified themes as a factor that either inhibited aggression or promoted prosocial coping. In their study, prosocial heuristics included beliefs that fighting won't solve the problem, and the belief that violence will end in injury. In addition, the students in their study articulated eight different antisocial heuristics that were frequently identified as supports for aggressive coping. These included: (a) they deserve what they get; (b) I don't care about the consequences; (c) it's okay (even necessary) to fight if they throw the first punch; (d) if I'm being treated unfairly, I should do it; (e) violence is everywhere, and everyone will use it; (f) if I fight now, maybe I won't have to fight again; (g) there is no other way but fight; and (h) this person is no good, they are not worth it, and I'm not close to them. Heuristics, values, and attitudes influence the cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes of coping automatically (Baugh & Ferguson, 2003), which was reflected by the reactive and "hot-tempered" responses articulated by some of the participants.

Several interpersonal factors that emerged as barriers and supports to prosocial coping may not be adequately addressed by skills-based interventions. For example, how close the student's relationship was with the other person involved in the situation was the second most frequently coded support for prosocial coping. Youth who were friends or had a long social history (e.g., known them for a long time) with the assailant were

more likely to enact prosocial coping strategies. On the other hand, a lack of friendship or closeness with the other person was identified by 16% of the sample as a factor that would inhibit their use of prosocial strategies, and instead may support aggression. In addition, the presence of bystanders was a frequently cited barrier to prosocial coping. Consistent with findings reported by Fagan and Wilkinson (1998), Prinstein and Cillessen (2003), and Salmivalli et al. (1996), students involved in the present study described how bystanders encourage violence by boosting up conflict, or purposely “push buttons” in order to witness a fight. Students mentioned that they may be less willing to talk out a problem or use another prosocial coping strategy unless they are alone with the person. In the presence of others, students indicated they felt pressured by their peers to fight, and feared being considered a “punk” if they walked away, told an adult what was happening, or tried to talk the problem out. This was particularly true if the other person involved in the situation wanted to fight; students identified being pressured not to walk away from a fight, particularly if their assailant got “in their face” or threw the first punch. This suggests the importance of changing perceived norms towards violence, which may be particularly difficult considering the reinforcement that aggressive adolescents get from their peers (Graham & Juvonen, 2002; Prinstein et al., 2001; Salmivalli, 1996).

Olweus' (1993) school-wide bully prevention program attempts to address this issue by aiming to restructure the social environment of schools. For instance, his intervention involves informing students, teachers, and parents about the incidence of bullying, and advocates showing videotapes that accentuate the social nature of peer victimization (e.g., demonstrate the role of bystanders in perpetuating and escalating

victimization events). Further, students are encouraged to develop classroom-or school-based rules regarding bullying and witnessing bullying, such as a code of ethics that will encourage bystanders of peer victimization to intervene. Unfortunately, efficacy studies did not incorporate measures to test whether norms towards aggression changed as a result of the intervention, though participants in the program did report improvements in school climate and lower incidences of either initiating or experiencing peer victimization (Olweus, 1994). Although Olweus' work is a promising first step towards changing adolescent norms about aggression, this is a difficult endeavor that requires more empirical attention. It is likely that changing norms towards aggression will require interventions across multiple levels, including those targeting the family, the community, and the media. Future intervention studies should include measures of peer norms as part of their outcome measures in order to determine empirically effective strategies for promoting prosocial norms within the adolescent subculture.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although this study was valuable in its attempt to provide a comprehensive view of coping with victimization, several limitations should be noted. One of the most serious limitations of this study was the sample size. In general, a total sample of 80 participants is large for qualitative research; however, because this was a mixed-methods design, it is probable that 80 participants were not enough to detect social cluster group differences in coping strategies. For instance, Zimmerman and colleagues (2004) conducted a mixed-methods investigation in which they examined themes that emerged from essays written by 391 high school students on causes of youth violence. They detected significant

gender differences through chi square analyses. Similarly, Troop-Gordon & Asher (2005) used mixed-methods on a sample of 261 children and found that youth who differed on gender and social adjustment also differed in the way in which their goals for coping changed as they met obstacles to their efforts. This suggests that the sample size for the present study is less than similar designs that detected group differences.

The lack of congruence between information collected from the self-report surveys and the individual interviews is another limitation of the present study; self-reported level of aggression was not predictive of generating aggressive coping techniques. It is unclear why the lack of consistency between methodologies was so pronounced in this study. One noted limitation of interviews is that some youth give socially desirable responses, or elicit responses that they perceive the interviewer wants to hear (Kazdin, 2003). It is possible that some students were uncomfortable with the interview format and were not as forthcoming with their coping behaviors as they would have been if they could have completed an anonymous questionnaire. Interestingly, however, fighting and retaliating verbally or socially were the second and third most frequently identified coping responses, indicating that several children were not afraid to be judged as aggressive. This may be reflective of their striving for social status. Some youth view aggression and toughness as a central way to gain status, popularity, and power (Fagan & Wilkinson, 1998; Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003); they may have wanted to convey a tough image to the interviewer, for fear of being considered a “punk.” Another explanation for the discrepancies between responses on the surveys and the interviews could be that students had more difficulty generating coping responses, as was required

of them during the interview, than ranking the likelihood that they would engage in a predetermined behavior, as was required of them on the questionnaire.

Another limitation of this study is the failure to reach saturation for many of the themes. Strauss and Corbin (1998) indicate that a theme is considered saturated when no new information, dimensions, conditions, actions, or interactions are apparent in the data. They state that pure saturation is difficult to achieve, as new information can always be generated. However, they indicate that a good rule of thumb is that saturation is adequate when it would seem counterproductive to continue collecting additional data. In the present study, many themes did meet saturation (e.g., talking it out, fighting, social aggression). Part of this issue dealt with the variability of the interview quality; some interviewers were more thorough and followed-up with appropriate questions whereas others did not adhere to the protocol. Ideally, however, additional data would have been collected to further develop theories regarding some of the less frequently identified themes (e.g., joke/laugh it off, end the relationship). Of particular interest would have been to learn more about how youth viewed ending the relationship with their assailant. In a study examining the perceived efficacy of different coping strategies in response to problems in the peer and school domain, students who were successful at managing stress generally rated “ending the relationship” as at least a somewhat effective response to peer victimization (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002). However, students who participated in the present study seemed quick to end the friendship, to the point of completely cutting off all ties. It would be beneficial to revisit this issue in future research to determine contextual factors involved in friendship termination.

This study relied exclusively on self-report data. Research on children that relies solely on self-report data is often criticized for its accuracy. This is particularly true of studies that assess aggression or delinquent behavior. It may have been beneficial to have teachers and/or parents complete measures of their child's adjustment to gain a better understanding of the participants' adjustment (Kazdin, 2003). However, parents and teachers are less adept at noticing internalizing behaviors, and may not be the most reliable source for reporting coping style. Nevertheless, input from additional sources would have strengthened this study, and would have provided another source of triangulation. Future studies should incorporate behavioral ratings for additional sources.

Another methodological limitation of this study was that students responded to hypothetical situations of victimization. Unfortunately, whether the student had experienced a similar dilemma, or the degree to which the student imagined being in the situation was not assessed. The fact that the situation was hypothetical raises the issue of formal (e.g., reflections) and functional (e.g., actual behaviors) self-evaluation (Ray & Cohen, 1997). It is possible that how students say they would respond is quite different than how they would actually respond in the moment. Additional studies that incorporate observational data on how youth actually cope in stressful situations would greatly benefit the field.

Despite these limitations, the present study has identified pertinent information that should be considered during the development, revision, and evaluation of violence prevention programs. Further, this study has identified several issues that should be addressed in future research. For instance, a replication of this study employing a larger

sample is necessary to test the proposed hypotheses adequately. It is likely that sampling a larger group of participants would produce higher base rates for the emergent coping responses, which are necessary for the statistical detection of group differences between members of distinct social clusters. Further, the results of the qualitative analyses could be incorporated into a questionnaire that could be administered more efficiently to a large sample of students. The questionnaire should include the likelihood that the participant would try each coping response, and should inquire about goals and motives driving each coping response. Further, students should be asked to rank the order in which they would try each coping response, and how their goals and behaviors would change if their initial coping response was met with failure. The questionnaire should also include factors that facilitate and inhibit the use of the coping techniques in order to determine how students problem solve about the social, physical, and emotional consequences of their behaviors. The questionnaire could be used to learn more about how students cope with victimization, and could also be used to measure changes in coping behaviors as part of the outcome battery of an evaluation of a bully prevention program.

Finally, additional research should be conducted that considers the effectiveness of the coping responses that emerged from the present study. Although some work has been conducted in this area (e.g., Farrell et al., 2005a; 2005b; Sandler et al., 1994; Tolan, Guerra, & Montaini-Klov Dahl, 1997), studies should be conducted that address contextual factors and individual differences that may influence the effectiveness of coping response. For instance, it is likely that effective coping behaviors for students living in predominantly middle-class neighborhoods are different than for students living

in poorer, inner-city neighborhoods (Sandler et al., 1994). Further, coping behaviors that are effective for socially well-adjusted youth may be ineffective, or even detrimental for chronically-victimized youth.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has identified the types of coping behaviors that African-American adolescents use in response to peer victimization, and has demonstrated a rigorous process of classifying these responses as prosocial, aggressive, or avoidant. This comprehensive view of the coping process allowed a thorough examination of the cognitive, affective, and behavioral components that are activated in response to peer victimization, and a look at what factors inhibit or facilitate prosocial techniques. African-American youth attending urban public schools face many internal and social challenges (Farrell et al., 2005) and must balance internal and external demands as they cope with peer victimization. Future intervention work should take into account the complexity of the coping process, and move toward creating inclusive, supportive environments that promote the use of prosocial, non-violent coping strategies.

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APPENDIX A: PROTOCOL FOR RESPONSE ENUMERATION INTERVIEWS

GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS

Explain the mechanics of the interview:

1. This is the interview you and your parents gave consent for last month.
2. The interview will take about 1 hour.
3. I would like to tape record our conversation so we can have your exact words later when we analyze all of these interviews. These tapes will be typed up but your real name or any name you mention will be changed so no one will know what you have said. After we type the interviews, we will erase the tapes.
4. If there is a question you don't want to answer you can say so and not answer it. If you want to stop the interview at any time you can let me know and I'll stop and discard the tape.
5. All of the information you say will be kept private. Nothing that you tell us will be shared with your parents, teachers, students, or anyone else. The only exception is that if I believe you are in immediate danger, I am required to report it to the appropriate person, like my supervisor or the guidance counselor at school.
6. Sometimes we might be interrupted if a teacher or students comes into the room. Let's just stop talking then, and we can start again when the person is gone.

7. I might write down some words while you're talking, just to keep me on track with what you are saying.

Explain the purpose of the interview:

1. The purpose of this interview is to find out how kids might handle different problems, or what they think would work and not work, and some of the things that might make it easier or harder to handle the situations in different ways.
2. I will describe three situations, one at a time. We want to know what you would do in response to these situations, and what would both help you to do the response, or keep you from doing the response. We also want to know what other kids at your school would do in response to these situations.
3. This information will be used in the future to help students in middle school deal with some of the problems they have in their lives.

Check for understanding:

1. Does this make sense? Do you have any questions?

Present the situation on the card:

1. Hand the card to the student and read the situation aloud.
2. Ask the following questions:
 - a. If this situation was happening to you, what would you be thinking?
 - b. How would it make you feel?
 - c. What kind of things would you be worried or concerned about?
 - d. What is the most important thing to happen in the situation? How do you want to see the situation end?
 - e. What do you think you would likely do in this situation? Why?

- f. How do you think your relationship with the person would change if you did this?
- g. So you said you would [state their response]. What would make it easier for you to do that? Anything else?
- h. What would make it hard for you to do that? What would keep you from doing that? Anything else?
- i. What do you think most kids would do if [read situation]?
- j. If this situation was happening, what should you do? What is the right thing to do?
- k. [Show student card with self-efficacy ratings]. I'm going to show you this card, and I want you to tell me how confident you are that you could [state response]. Are you not at all sure, a little sure, somewhat sure, or very sure that you could do that?
- l. What would make it easier for you to do what you think you should do?
- m. What would make it harder for you to do what you think you should do?
- n. Is there anything else that you would like to do but you might not do?

Present additional problem situations to the student and repeat questions a-n.

Debrief:

We've talked about a lot of difficult problems today. If you have a problem that is going on, it is always a good idea to talk to a trusted adult about it, like a teacher, parent, or guidance counselor. Do you have an adult that you can trust? Thank you for participating in this study. The information you have given us will help us help students in the future.

APPENDIX B: LIST OF THE 25 PROBLEM SITUATIONS INCLUDED IN THE
RESPONSE ENUMERATION INTERVIEWS

1. You told a good friend you were interested in going with someone. You see your friend flirting and trying to talk with this person like they want to go out with them.
2. You worked really hard on an assignment for school. When you get the grade from your teacher, you think the grade is really unfair.
3. Your parents or other adults won't let you do things because they worry about your safety. Your parents may not let you go out at night, or may not let you go where you want to because they want to protect you. However, you disagree and think you should be able to do these things.
4. A friend was careless with something you loaned them and it got damaged. This was something special to you and it could not be easily replaced. You trusted your friend to take care of this for you.
5. Other kids at school tease and pick on you. They call you names and make fun of you.
6. A friend asks to cheat off a paper you worked really hard on. Their friendship is really important to you but this was your work and it took you a lot of time to do.
7. You and a friend are joking and cracking on each other. You accidentally say something that you didn't think would cross the line, but your friend gets really

mad at you. You didn't mean it, you were just joking around but you crossed the line and now your friends want to fight you for real.

8. Your teacher can't control the kids in your classroom. Students are talking and playing around. The teacher is talking but the students ignore her.
9. Somebody is spreading a rumor about a student and you get blamed for it. Now you have a big problem with this person who thinks you were talking about them behind their back.
10. There is someone that you'd like to meet, but you don't know what to do. You really like this person, but you are having a hard time figuring out how to talk to them.
11. An adult at school disrespects you in front of other students by yelling at you or calling you names.
12. There is stuff they are talking about in class that you think is very interesting and that you really want to understand. You read the class assignments and listen to the teacher, but you just can't figure it out.
13. Other students are disrupting class and making it hard for you to concentrate and get your work done.
14. Your teacher picks on you or singles you out. Your teacher seems to always be getting on you, even when other students are acting up.
15. There is a student who comes to school who smells bad all the time. They haven't taken a shower or cleaned themselves up, and you have to be around them.

16. Someone started a rumor about you and other students are keeping it going and making the rumor worse. Now, it seems like all the kids are talking about you.
17. One of your teachers is upset and stressed out all of the time. You don't know why, but she seems to take her frustrations out on the kids. Now you need to try to talk to her about one of your assignments, but you saw her yelling at another student earlier and you are concerned about how she will treat you if you try to talk to her on a day when she is upset and stressed out.
18. Your teacher punishes you without knowing what was going on. You try to explain, but your teacher won't listen.
19. Another kid at school says something to you that is disrespectful about your family.
20. Two of your friends are fighting and they try to put you in the middle of it. You feel pressure from both sides because they can't get along, and they each want you to take their side.
21. You and another kid get into an argument at school. Other students are there boosting it up saying, "Fight, fight, fight."
22. Your parents don't like some of your friends you hang out with and won't let you do things if they think those friends will be there. This creates problems with your friends.
23. You told a friend something private and they told it to other people. This friend had promised they wouldn't tell anyone, but went behind you back and told other people.

24. Your teacher met with your parent because the teacher thinks you are having difficulty at school. Your parent talks to you about it, but ends up siding with your teacher. You think they are wrong.
25. Someone is “fake” with you, sometimes acting like a friend and sometimes saying mean things about you. You can’t trust them because they change how they act all the time.

Vita

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